

ADAM'S CLAY



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ADAM'S CLAY

A Novel

BY

COSMO HAMILTON

AUTHOR OF "DUKE'S SON," "NATURE'S VAGABOND," ETC.

NEW YORK

BRENTANO'S

UNION SQUARE

1907

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Part I

THE MAN

“ Man is fire and woman tow ; the devil comes and sets them in a blaze.”—PROVERB.

ADAM'S CLAY

CHAPTER I

OUTSIDE, the wind shrieked like a human being in a state of hysterical rage. Trees bowed low before its unmeaning, unnecessary, irresistible swirl. Their leafless branches swished the air like whips, and the limbs of those that had grown old creaked painfully. The younger trees, with the foolish pride of youth, made an irritable attempt to resist the common enemy, and for their temerity and impertinence were bent like fishing-rods, or uprooted and flung far.

Upon the slanting slate roof of the old farm-house the cold rain beat incessantly. It ran along the gutters, down the pipes, and into the drain with a noise like the gurgling of thirsty horses drinking.

An unfastened door of an outhouse banged disconsolately at almost regular intervals, as though performing a part in the uproarious cantata, and

when the angry music sank for a moment into *piano*, a chained-up dog raised his voice in a dismal solo.

Inside the farm-house warm fires blazed, oak shutters were fastened over the windows to keep out the wind, and an aroma of coffee and tobacco smoke came pleasantly to the nostrils.

For all that, peace and contentment did not face one another in front of the wide-mouthed fire.

On one side of the open grate in the parlour sat a long-limbed, square-shouldered young man, with vague discontent and envy in his eyes, turning over the leaves of an album of photographs. On the other side, with his legs stretched out in front of him, chin low, the corners of his mouth turned down, and with a look of sneering pain in his screwed-up eyes, sat his father watching him closely.

A large oil lamp, carefully shaded, stood on an old oak table, and flung a strong, white light in a circle, into which came the young man and the older one, much of the highly-polished table itself, a tin of tobacco, an open copy of Thackeray's "Vanity Fair," and several much-smoked pipes lying upon a pewter ash-tray.

The faces of both men were thin and weather-worn. Both were strong, well-cut, well-bred faces,

moulded on the same lines, and bearing a close resemblance. The expression upon that of the son was habitually calm, dignified, and a little melancholy. The father's expression was invariably bitter and sarcastic, and a little cruel.

Outside the circle of light the room was in shadow. But when a tongue of flame licked an unburnt log, its low, oak-beamed ceiling and wainscotted walls, closely covered with oak-framed prints above long book-shelves—against which, by the side of a great bow-window, stood a rack of guns and fishing-rods—came fitfully into the picture.

A Welsh, bob-tailed sheep-dog, with hair matted up to its thighs, lay full stretch under the dresser in a dreamless sleep, exquisitely relaxed and comfortable. Against its back a well-grown black cat nestled with its nose between its paws. A copper kettle standing on the hob did its best to temper the wind's fierce melancholy by humming a cheerful song.

Hard knuckles rapped on the door.

"Come," said John Ashley, without taking his eyes from his son's face.

As an old man entered and came slowly across the room, the dog half opened one eye, closed it immediately, and fell again into a well-earned sleep.

John Ashley, the younger, bent his head lower over the album.

The photograph that engrossed his attention was of a beautiful woman dressed for a ball.

"What is it, Sloke?"

Old Jesse Sloke put a gnarled hand upon the table.

"Beg yur pardon, master, but Oi jest coom to tell 'ee as 'ow Oi've locked oop fur night."

"Very well. Good-night, Sloke."

John Ashley's nostril curled as he watched the expression of surprised admiration, curiosity and wonder that spread over the face of his son.

"Beg yur pardon, master, but t' wold mare her bin a-coughin' a bit s' evenin'."

"Oh, all right. I'll have a look at her in the morning. Good-night, Sloke."

The boy suddenly held the album nearer the light. His interest was almost breathless. There was a ring of anger in his father's voice.

The old man removed his hand from the table quickly, and shuffled a few paces towards the door. The cat rose, arched its back, stretched until it stood on tiptoe, yawned, turned round and round and lay down again.

"It be t' worstest night as we've 'ad this winter, master."

"Yes. Good-night, Sloke."

"Good-night, master. Good-night, Master John."

No answer came from the boy.

The old man made his way across the room with creaking boots, and shut the door quietly.

Ashley suddenly put up his foot and kicked the album. It fell upon the floor with a thud. The dog sprang to its feet.

"What were you looking at, Jack?"

The boy caught his breath.

"The . . . the most wonderful thing I—I've ever seen, father," he replied.

The wind shrieked derisively down the chimney as it swept over the house.

The father shot out a kind of laugh.

"That's what *I* thought before I married her," he said, "damn her soul!"

CHAPTER II

BOTH men rose to their feet. Ashley, the father, in a sudden state of blasphemous rage that he found himself unable to control; young Ashley from a feeling of indignant horror.

"You're speaking of my mother!" he cried.

Ashley turned, and looked at his son for a moment, noted, not without admiration, the fine indignation in every line of his figure, and burst into a loud, mirthless guffaw.

"Yes," he said, "one man is exactly like another. He can always afford to be chivalrous and Elizabethan about women who have done some other man a wrong. For one who has never seen the inside of a theatre—or the outside, for the matter of that—your attitude is splendid. You look just like the hero-prig of a drawing-room drama. Oh, keep it up. Don't become self-conscious. It was devilish good, and I've heard that very line spoken a thousand times by a dozen fat actors, made up to look youthful. 'You're speaking of my mother.'

Now shake your forefinger at me, and say, 'Take care, sir.' No, don't just say it—hiss it. . . . Ha! Ha! . . . Oh, what gorgeous humbug! What the devil's it got to do with you in any case? She was my wife before she was your mother, and for that reason I beseech the particular power who performs those functions to damn her soul."

There was something very horrible in the man's rage and fury. He flung his arms up and shook them above his head. And the veins stood out upon his forehead and swelled in his neck until they looked like whip-cord. Half-formed sentences tumbled out of his mouth—sentences made up of filthy abuse, agonised reproaches, and ingenious blasphemy. He forgot the presence of his son, and stormed about the room, now in the shadow, now in the circle of light, like a man who had just been told of some detestable act of treachery, a man of violent passions, and an exaggerated sense of his own importance. Only a man incapable of forgiving, who had nursed some wrong silently for years, who had chewed the cud of bitterness, and allowed a self-made martyr's crown of thorns to tear his flesh constantly, in whose heart hatred had been slowly fermenting until it had become a kind of poison, and whose jealous silence was suddenly

broken, could have let himself go and get out of control in such a way.

"Mother—a word that canting people call beautiful. Mother—meaning, in this smug country, a woman who has gone through the sacred rites of religion, and brought into the world a child by the man who loves her. 'You're speaking of my mother.' I'm not. I'm speaking of my wife, the woman I would have gone to hell for—have gone to hell for—the woman who tricked me, and lied to me, who had all that was best of me and flung me over. That's the woman I'm speaking about, damn her soul!"

Ashley came and stood in front of his son.

"Yes," he said, "I'm speaking of your mother. You've never heard me say these things before. You've never quite been sure that you ever had a mother. For twenty-five years the word 'mother' has never been spoken in this house, in your hearing. But the things you've heard me say to-night I have cried aloud every night of the twenty-five cursed years that I have spent in this self-made Siberia. Solely because you might never be tricked and lied to and flung over as I have been, I have kept you away from refined women and honourable men, and have brought you up in the company of trees, the only Christians God has ever made, except dogs.

It's your own fault that you have heard me recite aloud the words I have repeated to myself until I know them by heart. When I saw you looking at the woman who was my wife, as I looked at her when I saw her first, you unlocked the blue room of my life and came inside. . . . Where did you find that album?"

Young Ashley pointed to a mildewed leather box. "I found it in that. It was in one of the barns."

"Give it to me. Now that you have found my photographic series of ghosts, I may as well personally conduct you round the gallery."

Ashley put the album on the table under the lamp. For a moment he kept his hand upon it as though afraid to open it. His mouth twitched, and he gave a shudder.

Young Ashley was quick to see the pain his father was undergoing. The great love that he felt for this hitherto silent man who had been his mother, brother, sister, and friend so long as he could remember, swept away his feeling of intense curiosity.

"Don't open it, father!" he said awkwardly. "Let's put the album back into the barn."

Ashley understood all that the boy meant to convey, and was grateful. He stretched out his hand and grasped his son's arm.

"Jack," he said, "have you ever wondered why I have never spoken to you about your mother?"

"Yes," replied young Ashley.

"Often?"

"Not often."

"When?"

"At night, after reading some book in which there has been a mother."

A look of bitter disappointment came into Ashley's eyes.

"I've been persuading myself," he said, "that you found me sufficient."

"I have," replied the boy quickly.

"No, you haven't," said Ashley jealously. "You've never seen or heard of your mother, and yet, when I cursed her just now, as she deserves to be cursed, you forgot all the years I've devoted to you and stood up for her."

The boy was silent.

"I want to know something else," said his father. "Have you ever wondered why a man of my type should have buried himself in this farm for twenty-five years?"

"No," said young Ashley.

"I haven't ever struck you as being a kind of

whipped dog, who has been flung whimpering out of the world and spent the rest of his life hiding?"

"No," said young Ashley.

"Have you ever felt suddenly sick of this place, and been filled with a longing to get away and see what's the other side of it? If you can say no to that, I will put this album back into the barn. If you can't say no, I will open it and show you why I am here, why you and I have remained here all these years, and why the mention of your mother's name makes me blaspheme like a drunken cabman."

"I can't say no," said young Ashley.

"You can't?" cried the elder man, in a shrill voice. "You can't? My God! Then I've failed. Every moment that I've been awake since I brought you here, a baby of eight months old, I've tried to make you feel that I was your mother as well as your father. My God! is that woman coming between me and all she left me?"

Again his temper made him hysterical, and he struck the book furiously and flung his son away. Then he caught him by the arm and drew him back.

"Jack," he pleaded, "don't you love me? Am I nothing to you after all these years? I've been a better mother than many a woman would have been, and I've tried very hard to make up to you for the

loss of a mother. Have I failed so utterly that you are hankering to leave me? Jack, Jack!"

Like a woman, this curious man—high-strung, jealous, brought by the constant nursing of a grievance very near to madness—clung to the boy's arms and peered anxiously into his face. His hands shook, and his mouth trembled, and all self-control was forgotten.

Young Ashley had never seen his father in such a mood before. He had looked upon him, hitherto, as a strong, energetic man, with the pluck of a lion; superbly fearless, somewhat hot-tempered, utterly impatient and scornful of sentimentality or morbidity.

He wrestled with an insular horror of showing his feelings, and said :

"Father, I always have loved you, and I always shall love you."

With a hoarse exclamation of joy, Ashley bent down and kissed his full-grown son on the cheek as though he were still a child. Then he became self-conscious and coloured up, and walked away touching things uneasily, while he cleared his throat and pulled himself together.

Young Ashley remained standing by the table. It seemed to him almost uncanny that the mere sight of an album of photographs should have made

his father show a side of his nature so totally in variance to the one he habitually showed, and that in ten minutes the monotonous peace of the lives of two men could be so rudely shaken.

Chasing these thoughts through young Ashley's slow-thinking head, came one which rounded him up with a jerk. Until ten minutes ago he had never for the shade of an instant questioned the fact that his father was infinitely the stronger man of the two. But the outbursts he had witnessed of impotent, uncontrollable rage, of jealousy, and finally of womanish appeal, made young Ashley suddenly aware of the fact that in reality he was the stronger man. Being almost ludicrously unworldly and unsophisticated, he could not understand what his mother had done to make a mark so indelible upon the life of his father. What he did vaguely realise was that the relative positions of his father and himself had undergone a complete and unalterable change. He no longer stood in need of being looked after by his father. It was his duty to nurse and take care of the man who had been his parents, brother, sister, and friend for so many years.

It had become suddenly and horribly evident to him that his father was as near madness as the wind that howled round the roof of the farm-house.

CHAPTER III

JOHN ASHLEY did not return to his chair at the table for some minutes. He paced the room in the shadow, breathing hard, watching his son's face with wistful eagerness.

"He loves me, thank God for that," he said to himself. "But if he becomes restless and dissatisfied, and wants to go out into the world, what will become of me? I'll never go back—never, never. I had enough of men and women. I won't have him made to suffer as I have suffered. He must be kept here, among the trees. God! if he should have inherited her restlessness, her desire for knowledge, her insatiable curiosity. . . . I'll not believe that I am to be fastened on a second time and bent double. I'll not believe it. Isn't it enough to have been driven into hell every night of my life for twenty-five years by a woman? I'll not believe that the child she bore me is to be made to cut at my heart as she did. . . . He must be kept here. He is mine. I need him. And if I can help it no

woman shall do for him what was done for me. Yes, he must be kept here. I'll show him whether it's better to live among trees or among men and women of the world."

He sat down. The sheep-dog looked up at him through a fringe of grey hair, gave a great sigh, and stretched himself out again. The wind flung itself against the window with a shriek.

"Jack."

"Yes, father."

"Come here and look over my shoulder. I'm going to show you why I brought you here and came here myself."

Young Ashley sat down by his father's side. After some hesitation he put his strong hand upon his father's shoulder. A smile trembled upon John Ashley's lips.

He opened the album at the first page. Upon it there were two photographs.

"Here," said John Ashley, "we have me at the age of thirteen. Nice-looking boy, eh?"

"Yes," said young Ashley.

"Chubby and optimistic and happy, you'd think, wouldn't you?"

"Yes," said young Ashley.

"So I was. The world went very well then. I

had shown promise on the cricket field, and no tuck shop in Eton could turn out messes too sweet for my tooth. Now look at the photograph by its side. Handsome lad that, eh ? ”

“ Yes,” said young Ashley.

“ The face of a fine, frank, honourable boy, you’d think, wouldn’t you ? ”

“ Yes,” said young Ashley.

“ My best friend ; the boy who was at the same dame’s school with me, who went on to Eton with me, who shared all my secrets, all my petty triumphs and disappointments, whom I loved and looked up to. Damn *his* soul too ! ” He turned over the page and thumped it with his fist. “ Here we have the same two faces five years later. They are still chubby and optimistic and happy, aren’t they ? ”

“ Yes,” said young Ashley.

“ A trifle smarter as to hair, a trifle more careful as to the set of collar and tie, you will notice. My best friend and I, at that age, had shared many more petty triumphs and disappointments. At that age—eighteen—we were both in the eleven, we had both played against Harrow at Lords—epoch-making times !—had spent the holidays together at our respective homes, had shot over the same covers, hunted with the same pack, been to the same

theatres, the same dances, the same race-meetings, and the same funerals. At that age, I still believed my best friend to be the most honourable, the most fearless, the most frank boy—man—I beg his pardon!—the world had ever contained."

That page also was turned over. Again the fist went down upon it with a bang. Other pages followed, in which there were unessential school groups, pictures of Henley, views of Eton and Windsor Castle, of a prim white house standing in a broad park, of stables and ponies, dogs, and elderly women in queer clothes and cork-screw ringlets; old men in stocks with much hair upon their faces, wearing flat-brimmed top-hats, or bowlers with infinitesimal brims; views of places of public interest—the Thames, the Tower of London, Trafalgar Square, the Houses of Parliament, Westminster Abbey; prize-fighters, actresses, cricket elevens.

Then Ashley kept his hand upon an open page.

"Real men, now," he said. "Undergraduates of Cambridge University. Very fine collars and ties now, eh?"

"Yes," said young Ashley.

"And waistcoats—mark the waistcoats, and don't fail to notice a suspicion of whisker! Ah, ha! Men

indeed! . . . No two men could have been more together, more in sympathy than we two. Look; here we are in hunting kit, and here in evening clothes as members of a swagger club; here in running shorts, here in gym. kit, here in the clothes we wore in a dramatic entertainment—my best friend as the hero. He always played the hero. . . . Then we come to him in his first wig and gown as a member of the Inner Temple. I was no book man, and the Temple was closed to me, but here I am, opposite as usual, as a man about town. As it was impossible for me to share rooms with him in his inn, he shared my rooms in Maddox Street. And here”—John Ashley's voice took a deeper note—"we come to the photograph of a girl."

Young Ashley bent over the page. "How lovely!" he said.

"How lovely!" echoed his father. "Do you wonder that my best friend and I began to see a little less of one another about this time?"

"No," said young Ashley.

"Look; here she is again on her horse, and here in the dress in which she was presented, and here in the dress she wore the night I proposed to and was accepted by her. 'Good luck, old man,' my best friend said that night. '*She* is the lucky one.'

. . . Let's get on. There are not many more now. This was taken on our honeymoon in Paris, and this at a little chalet on the Alps; this in Vienna, and this in Bond Street. We had settled in London, a little house in Park Street, to which my best friend had a latch-key. . . . Look at this. The proud father, the beaming mother, the bald-headed son and heir."

"Me!" cried young Ashley.

"Yes, you. And that is the last photograph but one. Can you guess what the last one is? No, you can't. You have seen the faces of my best friend, and of the beautiful woman who was my wife. You would refuse to believe that in the next photograph my best friend stands by her side, wouldn't you? You would absolutely refuse to believe it, eh?"

"Yes," said young Ashley.

John Ashley turned to the last photograph, and his face became suddenly inflamed, and his voice thick.

"By God, then, you would be wrong! Not a year after that woman with the face of an angel stood at the altar swearing to love, honour, and obey one man, she has her photograph taken with his best friend, the most honourable man the world had ever contained, on a second honeymoon in Paris!"

"No," cried young Ashley, "no!"

"Yes, yes, yes! Ah, ha! that's a facer for you, eh? That throws you back on your haunches, eh? My friend and my wife, the man of honour—the woman of integrity, gentleman and gentlewoman. Read this note, pasted below the photograph. I found it on my writing-table when I returned after three hours' absence spent at polo. How well she formed her letters. 'It was all a mistake. Frank and I fought against the inevitable as long as we could. It has been too much for us. We have gone away. I have no grudge against you. You were very good, but love conquers all. Be good to baby.' . . . Now do you understand why I came here? Now can you understand why I say that God's only Christians are the trees? Now can you sympathise with me when I shout out at the top of my voice and ask someone or other to damn their souls?" He sprang to his feet and clutched young Ashley by the shoulders. "Jack, Jack, don't *you* leave me; Jack, don't *you* leave me too!"

The wind rattled the window and whistled down the chimney. Young Ashley put his arm round his father's shaking shoulder.

"Father, I'll never leave you," he said.

CHAPTER IV

WHEN young Ashley and his father stood in front of the farm in the morning, no other marks of the storm were visible except a few broken branches, several uprooted saplings, a tile or two lying smashed in the yard, several more lines round the eyes of the elder Ashley, and a keen, more sympathetic expression upon the face of Ashley the younger.

Together, in silence, they made their way to a heap of dead leaves and cabbage stalks, and young Ashley carried the album. Without a word he tore out page after page of it, made a pile of them, set them alight, and watched them burn. When nothing remained except charred paper, and the smoke had been gathered up by the sweet spring air, the two men—the other was a man now—solemnly shook hands, and went about their business, one on horseback to the sheep-pens in the valley, the other to the stables to attend to the coughing mare.

Nevertheless, peace did not sit upon the hearth of Ashley's farm. Only a figure made up to represent peace that was stuffed with sawdust sat there.

One week followed another in busy and useful monotony. Fruit trees broke into bud, a thousand red eyes blinked upon the branches and grew larger and larger in the warmth of the friendly sun. Eager green heads poked out of the good red earth in long, regular lines, and listened enraptured to the throbbing notes of the lark. Birds flirted in the stirring hedges, and began to look about for suitable sites wherein to build their homes, and the whole world was filled with the gentle movement of young life. And the two Ashleys went about their business industriously. Each kept watch upon the other. The father to see that the son showed no more signs of discontent, envy, and restlessness; the son that the father developed no more signs of the madness he had seen stamped upon his forehead.

Ashley the elder had no need of fear. The story that young Ashley had heard had bitten into his soul. The germ of desire to go out into the world, and do as other men did, died. The faithlessness of his mother and his father's best friend had appalled him. But young Ashley had every need

to watch his father with anxiety. The relationship between his father and himself had ripened and had become more openly affectionate, but the nights were few when young Ashley did not listen outside the elder man's door without hearing the storm renewed within.

But there was one night of all these about which young Ashley could never think without a shudder. During the whole of the day that preceded it, young Ashley was infinitely delighted and encouraged by a great change for the better in his father's condition. The elder man began the day with a quiet cheeriness that his son never remembered to have seen in him before. Shortly after daybreak young Ashley woke with a start to find his father, fully dressed, standing at the foot of his bed, smiling at him.

"Up you get, Jack, my lad. No laziness. There's lots to be done," Ashley sang out.

And young Ashley was on his feet in a moment. "All right, father," he replied, "I'll be down in ten minutes."

It was a cold, bleak morning. A keen north-east wind made the still leafless branches bend and twist uncomfortably. But the unaccustomed ring in his father's voice was more welcome to young Ashley than the sparkle of the sun.

Under his window, as he tubbed and hurried into his clothes, he heard his father talking to the dogs, and every now and then whistling a bar or two of some catchy tune. Young Ashley had never heard his father whistle before.

If he had been a conventionally reared man he would, being unobserved, have given thanks to God in some stiff formula laid down for the purpose, duly indexed, for performing the miracle. As it was, being a man, luckily, without any acquaintance with dogma, any knowledge of stereotyped forms and set speeches, he glanced at the sky and the trees and heaved a sigh of relief, and thanked God for the change in his father in a few colloquial words of his own, hot from his heart.

As the day grew older, the improvement ripened, and when father and son sat down together to their evening meal, it would not have been easy to have found two more unclouded faces in the country.

Old Sloke and his wife had talked over the master's new manner early in the morning, the old woman with a few glad tears. Sloke himself had caught the infection, and had shown his delight by making up a roaring fire and lighting not only an extra lamp but several candles.

And so the old dining-room of the melancholy

farm was a blaze of light that evening. Laughter, so long a stranger there, rang out continually. In high spirits, Ashley chaffed his son and old Sloke, and teased the bob-tailed sheep-dog. The latter, quick to realise the sudden change, made no attempt to lie under the dresser with its head on its paws watching the proceedings from behind a fringe of long grey hair, but took up a position by the side of the master's chair, and even went so far as to jog his arm now and then when the excellent aroma of the food got the better of him. The black cat too, usually as taciturn as its betters, was not behindhand in noticing the improved atmosphere. With a giddiness as unusual as it was undignified, he rolled on his back in front of the fire, boxed the ears of imaginary mice on the red-tiled hearth, and then sprang on to an unoccupied corner of the table and sat blinking at the two men, with all his purring machinery in full working order.

Both animals, for the first time in their lives, received titbits from the hand of their master, and when the meal was over fearlessly took up comfortable positions in front of the fire, instead of making themselves scarce in cold and shadowy corners of the room as was their custom.

When old Sloke had cleared the table, and

after much lingering had gone into the kitchen, young Ashley lit his father's pipe and sat down opposite to him on the other side of the hearth.

"It is good to see you like this, father," he said involuntarily.

"Is it, Jack? It's not better for you than for me, old man. I don't know why, but I feel happier to-day than I have done since . . . since I brought you here. I dreamt of your mother last night, and I woke feeling that we were, both of us, pretty nearly at the end of our troubles."

"What do you mean?" asked young Ashley quickly.

"I don't know, my dear fellow. I can only give you my impression. Something is going to happen greatly to the benefit of us both. I can only tell you that I have an idea that she and I are going to meet soon and remain together."

"You're not going to leave me?" cried young Ashley.

Old Ashley laughed and got up, and slapped his son on the shoulder, heartily, without a word. The silence was more eloquent than any remarks, however affectionate.

"And so it's good to see me in high spirits, is it, eh? I suppose I have been a fine specimen of

a bear with a sore ear." He gave a kind of chuckle as though he were looking back at something that had happened a long time ago, at which he could afford to be amused. "But those moods are over. In future you'll find me a very easy person to get on with."

Young Ashley examined his father with eager care. He was a fine, big man. His hair was very white and his thin face was heavily lined; but the haggard, introspective expression had gone out of it. Young Ashley noticed that the sarcastic mouth had become extraordinarily tender, and there was a peacefulness on the forehead and in the eyes that made the face almost unrecognisable.

"Has anything happened, father?" he asked.

"You know as much as I do, my dear fellow, and are not more surprised at me than I am at myself. I know that something is happening and that's all. I am not able to say why or how I know. I just know and am very thankful, because, of course, it has to do with my wife."

He sat down, puffed out a cloud of tobacco smoke, and fondled the ears of the sheep-dog, whose head had been pushed against his knee.

Both men sat quiet for several minutes. The son eyed his father wonderingly, hardly knowing

whether to be satisfied with the new state of things or nervous. He was naturally mystified and not unnaturally a little frightened. The father, lying back in his chair with his long legs stuck out in front of him, wore a peaceful and rather whimsical smile. The old grandfather clock ticked cheerfully and the cat purred upon the hearth.

"If I had my time over again," said Ashley presently, "I should do exactly as I did, in exactly the same blind and headlong way, and be just as wretched. All the same, my dear Jack, looking dispassionately at the matter, a man is only genuinely happy if he permits women to play a very small and very fleeting part in his life—I mean a man who is built on the same egotistical, narrow-minded lines as I am. It doesn't do to hand one's whole heart into the keeping of one woman. It is heroic and knightly and romantic, and all that ; but it is damned foolish. The thing to do is to give an infinitesimal portion of one's heart to a number of women—so little, in the bulk, as to make precious little difference to that queer organ. I advocate selfishness, egregious selfishness, as the one safe receipt for a permanently contented mind. It sounds horrid, but it is the receipt, whether they own to it or not, up to which every man and woman born

struggles to live. Remain unmarried, and all is well. Marry, and one of the parties, if not both, must necessarily be miserable. The clash of ego in every married man's house makes more din than the continual banging of a dinner-gong. In a bachelor's house the dinner-gong breaks the silence refreshingly. If ever you feel the need of femininity fight it for all that you are worth. If the desire beats you, make a friend, even go so far as to become engaged if you are inflicted with the heroic temperament, but go no further. Alone, a man is master of his soul. Coupled with a woman, he is neither master of his own nor hers. Yours is the ideal existence, Jack, old man. You know no woman, and have no desire to do so. If you wish to mould life into the particular shape that pleases you, you will remain as you are. If not, go out into the world and be strangled by a woman's eyelash."

"I won't risk it," said young Ashley, with a laugh.

"I'm glad to hear it," replied the father heartily. "For you are made on my lines to a turn. I see in you the same genius for dramatising small incidents, the uncomfortable habit of elevating a shaving pimple into a carbuncle. *You* are the pivot on which the earth revolves. Every stone thrown at you becomes a boulder, every pin-prick in your vanity a

sword-thrush. You wouldn't fall in love, you would dive into it head first. You would lay not merely your whole heart at the feet of the woman, but your whole soul, body, and brain. There are three ends to a love of this kind — madness, murder, or martyrdom. By a fluke I escaped from two of them, and have daily lit the pile at the foot of my cross for years. This is what you would do too, for you also would live to rue the day upon which you fell in love. This is the reason of my having kept you away from civilisation. When you are alone here. . . .”

“Why should I be alone here?” broke in young Ashley.

A blaze of affection leaped into old Ashley's eyes. He made a long arm, and rested his hand for a moment on his son's knee.

“Ah,” he said, “I like to hear that tone in your voice. It does me good. Thanks, Jack. . . .”

Young Ashley twisted his shoulders impatiently.

“I can't understand you to-night, father,” he said, with a note of irritation in his voice. “Since we finished dinner you have done nothing but talk like a man who has been told that he's going to—to . . .”

"Die?" asked Ashley.

"Yes," said young Ashley.

The father smiled.

"Isn't it odd? Of course I haven't been told so, but I do feel like a man who has been walking, walking, walking, and finds that he has almost arrived at the top of the hill. It's most queer. It doesn't make me feel sad. It only makes me feel . . . quiet. It makes me want to turn round and look back at the miles that I've so painfully covered and criticise the way I covered them, as though I were someone else. I rather like it."

"I don't," blurted out young Ashley.

Ashley gave a little laugh—a laugh of pleasure, of delight, of appreciation, of gratitude. He got up and sat on the arm of his son's chair, with his arm round his shoulder. There was something very boyish in the action.

"I should hate to leave you, old Jack," he said. "But in any case, whether it's to be soon or late, it is to be, and when you are alone here to plod through the remaining years of your allotted time, remain alone. Shun women as you would shun deadly nightshade. For all their beauty and fascination they are never worth the candle. All the same"—he rose and threw up his head and clenched his

fists—"oh, my God! what wouldn't I give for one touch of my wife's hand!"

The bob-tailed sheep-dog shot out an impatient sigh, shambled to the door, sniffed and snorted under it, pawed it twice petulantly, and then turned and looked reproachfully at its master.

Ashley glanced at the clock, and gave a loud laugh

"Jack," he cried, "look at the time! We are an hour and a half later than we've ever been before. No wonder that old woman of a dog is angry. We've spoilt his beauty-sleep. Come to bed, old man."

And so the lamps were put out, and the candles snuffed and doors bolted, and the two men made their way up the broad oak stairs to their respective rooms. For a quarter of an hour, while young Ashley undressed, Ashley sat on his bed and talked animatedly about the work on the farm, of what had to be done the next day, and of the prospects of the year. There was nothing in his manner to make young Ashley feel either mystified or uneasy, and when, finally, he swung out of the room, with a cheery good-night, he left his son filled with hope, happier than he had been since the discovery of the album. Before he had time to gloat over this, sleep touched his brain with its finger and switched out the light.

If young Ashley had been sleeping less heavily an hour before daybreak, he would have heard his father creep in stockinged feet down the stairs, unbar the door with the greatest care, and make his way with a kind of run into the sleeping night, smiling curiously.

But young Ashley slept on without moving until daybreak, when he woke mechanically. In excellent spirits, he tubbed in the cold rain-water provided by the panting but cheerful Sloke, got into his breeches and gaiters and thick Harris tweeds, and stumped into his father's room.

"Here, Sloke," he shouted, "how long's my father been up?"

The old man shuffled along the passage and stood on the threshold of the room.

"Earlyish this marnin', Master John," he said. "'E be oop an' aboot afore Oi brought the water."

"By Jove!" said young Ashley.

"'E be feelin' grand an' well this marnin' too, so Oi think, Master John."

Young Ashley nodded, called the dog, and went out into the chill morning about his business.

Ashley was not back for breakfast. This gave young Ashley and the Slokes no uneasiness. He frequently remained out in distant parts of the farm

and took breakfast with the men. He was not back for lunch. This, also, was not an infrequent occurrence. So young Ashley and the Slokes made a hearty meal with easy minds. But when young Ashley returned to the house for a cup of tea without finding his father he left it untouched, saddled and mounted his horse and started off at a gallop for that part of the farm to which old Ashley devoted himself. On the way he asked a man here, and a man there, if they had seen his father.

"Not this marnin', Master John," was the invariable answer.

With his heart in his throat, young Ashley made the round of the farm from end to end. Not a soul had seen his father. He sat upon his heaving horse and listened.

"Father, father!" he shouted, in a voice that had no sound.

Twice he returned to the farm to find Sloke standing by the gate. Each time the old man shook his head silently, and watched young Ashley turn and ride off at top speed.

Filled, by this time, with terror that made him tremble from head to foot, young Ashley rode blindly here and there. Scraps of his father's remarks, made the previous evening, floated through his brain, and

when at last he found himself at the edge of a deep pool, black and silent in the fading light, he slipped out of the saddle and stood looking into it with arrested breath, open-mouthed, his ears filled with noises.

Too terrified to move, young Ashley remained where he had dismounted, peering fearfully at the water for a quarter of an hour. A dozen times the reflection of a cloud tricked him into the belief that his father's stiff body was floating among the weeds. A dozen times he leaned forward with a cry, with veins tingling with pain.

Suddenly he heard approaching steps and a voice raised in song. With a revulsion of feeling that brought the sweat to his forehead, he looked up and saw his father swinging along the footpath on the other side of the pool. The eyes of the two men met simultaneously.

Ashley waved his hand. "Hullo, Jack!" he shouted.

Young Ashley did not wait for his father to come round the pool. He left his horse and ran to his father, caught him by the shoulders and shook him angrily.

"Where have you been, damn you?" he cried shrilly. "Where have you been? Where have you been?"

Old Ashley took his shaking without a word, realising instantly, from the trembling of his son's lips, the depth of feeling which carried him away.

"Forgive me, Jack," he said. "I ought to have warned you. I'm sorry."

"Where have you been," young Ashley repeated, forcing back a rush of tears.

"I had business in the town, old man. I started early and didn't want to disturb you. Forgive me. I didn't think that you'd be so . . ."

"It's all right," said young Ashley. "Let's go home." But he took his father's arm and held him tight with one hand and led the steaming horse with the other.

At dinner, and for the remainder of the evening, Ashley knew that his son was watching him closely. The boy showed his gratitude and relief in a dozen curious ways. He didn't allow Sloke to wait upon him at the meal, but himself handed everything to his father. He placed his chair in front of the fire, and loaded his pipe. He led the conversation round to impersonal subjects, and drew his father out. He laughed loudly at all his father's witticisms, and finally carried up his candle to his bedroom.

That night it was the son who lingered in the father's room. Ashley could see that he was under

close and minute inspection, and that his son's eyes were examining every corner to find any evidence of his visit to the town. It was only when his father was in bed, with the clothes over his ears, that young Ashley left the room. Even then the elder man could hear his son listening outside the door. When at last young Ashley went along the passage and entered his own room, old Ashley crept stealthily out of bed, unlocked a drawer in his dressing-table, and laid his hand for a moment on the cold barrel of a newly-purchased revolver.

On his face was the curious smile that he wore in the early morning.

"I don't think it will be long before I shall need you," he whispered. "Not so very long—please God."

CHAPTER V

THE days lengthened. The hedges, now well awake, burst into tender leaf. Celandines suddenly peopled the ditches, and pompous dandelions stood about the fields like dragoon guards at the easy. Birds had got beyond the lover stage and were now busy with the business of life. All the earth was up and doing.

The sawdust figure of Cheerfulness, so long a member of the Ashley household, had gone. Its place had been taken by Cheerfulness himself, rotund and beaming.

Young Ashley no longer found it necessary to keep a watch upon his father. The latter had entered what appeared to the Slokes and the farm hands to be a new lease of life. It became a commonplace thing to hear his laugh ring out frequently, and to see him striding about elastically with squared shoulders and head thrown back, giving kind words to all who worked upon the farm. Young Ashley looked like a dry plant newly

watered, and Sloke and his wife became almost objectionably cheerful. The once quiet farm-yard had completely shaken off its depression, and now echoed with bright voices and crisp sounds. The place, from end to end, seemed to have been touched suddenly with the wand of a fairy.

With very human adaptability young Ashley and the rest quickly settled down to the new manner and soon forgot that there had ever been an old one. No one noticed the almost pathetic air of expectancy that sat always upon the elder Ashley. His attitude was that of a man listening. His ears were tuned to catch some calling voice. He spent his days in killing time, metaphorically packed and ready for a journey, spoiling for the word that should send him upon his way. He covered up his eagerness as well as he could with a restless energy. But many times each day he fingered the key of the drawer in which lay his loaded revolver. The postman seldom called at the farm, and when he did call the letters were seized upon by old Ashley with an anxiety that made his fingers tremble and the blood rush to his face.

One bright, fresh evening, young Ashley got back to the farm with a keen appetite for dinner in advance of his father and found a letter lying

upon the table in the sitting-room. The envelope was bordered with black and bore an Australian postmark.

Young Ashley glanced at it carelessly and took off his riding-boots. A second time the letter caught his eye lying primly upon the table. He picked it up and examined it. It was addressed in a practised handwriting to "John Everard Campbell Ashley, Esq., c/o Messrs Coutts & Co., Strand, London, England. Please forward immediately."

Replacing the letter upon the table, young Ashley carried his boots out into the kitchen and stood them by the side of the great open fireplace. A kitten made a wobbly dash at his stockinged feet. Young Ashley stooped and picked it up, and held it, a ball of fluff, against his cheek for a moment. With an anxious but proud cry the mother leaped out of a box that was under the dresser and rubbed against his shins with erect tail.

"All right, old lady," said young Ashley. "I won't ill-treat your baby. Getting horribly adventurous now, eh? Soon he'll be able to get along without its mother, eh? Here you are, then."

He dropped the kitten softly back into the straw and watched the cat spring back again into the box and stretch itself out with a purring cry.

On his way up to his bedroom young Ashley found himself in the dining-room, again fingering the letter. He found nothing new upon the envelope, no hint of the identity of the writer in the address. And yet the letter seemed to be big with evil. He threw it from him with a sense of fright and stood staring at it as though he expected it to explode like a bomb. Then he shook himself with a laugh and ran up to his room.

But while he got out of his farm clothes, tubbed vigorously and dressed again, he could see nothing but the letter whichever way he looked. He tried to whistle away the odd feeling of impending trouble, but the sound died on his lips. He struggled to send his thoughts along pleasant lines, but the black-bordered letter rose up and formed a dam.

Returning to the sitting-room quickly he caught up the letter and took it to the fire and held it towards the flame. But no, it was addressed to his father, and he drew back his hand. Finally, he placed it face downwards on the high mantel-board, saying to himself that he would tell his father of the thing in the morning. All the same, he spent a miserable, restless evening.

He was standing at the window when Ashley

returned. He noticed that a queer, eager look came into his father's face the moment he entered the room. He halted on the threshold and stood with distended nostrils and with eyes that searched the room like a dog's, pointing.

During the meal it seemed to young Ashley that his father's joviality and high spirits were forced, and that while he talked his thoughts were elsewhere. Several times young Ashley shuddered to see his father's eyes wander to the mantel-board, uneasily, as though drawn there by some irresistible magnet.

After the meal, the two men took up their accustomed places by the fire. The nights were still chilly, and the glow of warmth from the crackling logs was good. The conversation, too animated at first, became intermittent, became one-sided, ran dry. The elder Ashley laid back in his chair, with his lips pressed together, and his eyes crinkled up. His nervousness was painful to watch. He crossed and re-crossed his legs, drummed his fingers on the arm of his chair, and ran them frequently through his hair and over his dry lips.

Young Ashley, filled now with an intense desire to destroy the letter, eyed his father from beneath his eyebrows, and longed for him to go up to bed.

When at last he did rise, young Ashley could barely restrain a cry of warning, when his father deliberately turned and faced the spot upon the mantel-board upon which lay the letter. But the board was above the level of his eye, and the letter remained undiscovered.

As it was, young Ashley sprang to his feet.

"Well, father," he said breezily, "what about bed?"

The elder Ashley made no reply to the question. He turned to his son and looked at him searchingly for a moment.

"Jack," he asked, in a low voice, "did anything come for me to-night?"

Before young Ashley could answer, Sloke entered, anxious for a chat before retiring for the night.

"There be a foine show o' stars goin' on, gen'lemen," he said; "as foine a show as ever Oi remember scein'."

"That's good," said young Ashley.

"All the same, Oi do think as 'ow we're for gettin' a tidy bit o' rain before marnin'. They fellers be in'-an'-outin' rayther, an' that's a fact."

"Well, we can do with it," said young Ashley. "Good-night, Sloke."

The old man shot a look of whimsical reproach at

young Ashley, and directed his remarks squarely at his master.

"T' wold ooman be tellin' Oi to arst you, master, 'ow you liked the mutton to-night? Her was afeard the feller 'adn't been a-hangin' long enough; it got mixed oop somehow wi' t' others."

Young Ashley answered for his father.

"It was all right, Sloke; very nice. Good-night. We're just going to bed."

"Thank *you*, Master John," said the old man, with a shade of annoyance. "Good-night, master." He shuffled to the door. As he was going out, he turned with an air of renewed hope. "Oh!" he said, "Oi knoo as 'ow there were summat. The postman did tell Oi as 'ow there were a change o' Gov'ment oop i' London, master."

"Postman?" The elder Ashley was round upon the old man with a flash. "When did you see the postman?"

The blood surged into young Ashley's face, and his heart beat so loudly that he was afraid it would be heard.

Old Sloke wore a puzzled expression. "When did Oi see postman?"

"Yes, when?"

"Well, for certain, Oi did see postman this very

night as ever were. He brought a letter for you, master."

"Letter?" snapped Ashley. "What letter?"

With all his soul, young Ashley wished that old Sloke had lost his memory before he entered the room.

Sloke's rheumatic hand, twisted like the root of a tree, went up to the back of his head.

"Why, the letter," he said slowly, "that Oi did put upon the table afore dinner. 'Aven't you 'ad it, master?"

"No," shouted Ashley. "Where is it? Who the h—— has tampered with my letter? Damn it! can't you speak, one of you?"

Young Ashley pointed to the mantel-board. "It's . . . there," he said.

With unerring precision, Ashley's hand seized upon the letter. Trembling and eager, he carried it to the lamp and held it in the circle of light.

"At last, at last!" he cried; "at last!" Then he held it aloft, with his arms stretched out. "Almighty God," he said, "I give you thanks . . ."

He fell suddenly on his knees, and with his hands over his face, burst into a torrent of tears.

"Oh, my darling, my baby, my sweetheart . . . to be packed into a thing like that and given to

the worms. . . . Oh, it's damnable; it's unthinkable. I can't bear it. . . . Come back, even if you don't come back to me. . . . So exquisite a thing in such a place! Oh . . . oh . . ."

The man's grief was too appalling to witness. Old Sloke hurried away, awe-stricken. Young Ashley gazed at his father's crouching figure for a moment with the most poignant sympathy, and followed Sloke.

Work had to be done in the morning—there were the living to be fed—so Sloke and his wife crept silently to bed.

Not so young Ashley. With chattering teeth he sat down on the last stair but one, with his hands pressed over his ears and his blood smarting in his veins. His mother was dead—his mother whom he did not remember. The beautiful woman in the album in evening dress, who had deserted his father—the beautiful woman who had run away with his father's best friend.

It was the first time in his life that young Ashley had come face to face with death. He was not horrified or terrified; he was silenced, numbed.

A minute passed that was an hour.

Young Ashley started to find an arm round his

shoulder—a strong arm, pressed tightly. When it relaxed, young Ashley rose to his feet, and his father, smiling curiously, passed him and went upstairs. Young Ashley went into the sitting-room to turn out the lamp. While he made the windows secure for the night, he listened anxiously for any unaccustomed sound in the room above. His hands trembled as he shut the door, and his heart beat quickly, he knew not why. Suddenly a loud report echoed through the quiet house, and a dull thud shook the ceiling.

“Father! Father!” shouted young Ashley, as he groped blindly up the stairs.

CHAPTER VI

HE heard a faint laugh as he flung open the door of his father's room—a laugh in which there was a note of triumph and happiness.

Two candles were burning on the dressing-table. Their light fell upon the figure of Ashley, the elder, who lay upon the floor, in a pool of blood. The black-bordered letter sat coldly upon the dressing-table.

“Oh, father,” cried young Ashley, “father!” He tottered to his knees.

Ashley, the elder, struggled into his son's arms. There was a smile upon his drawn face.

“It is over,” he whispered eagerly. “I am out of hell.”

“You shan't go. You shan't,” burst out young Ashley in an agony. “I won't let you go. Father!”

A feeble arm fumbled its way round young Ashley's neck.

“No one can stop me, Jack. I am released,

thank God! Read the letter. No. Hold me tight. I know it. I will tell you what it says."

He slipped a little and seemed to shrink like a pricked ball. Young Ashley clung to him desperately, unable to speak.

"It says: 'Effie is dead. She asked me to write to you, and send her love to you both.' Dear lad, don't shake so. I am so glad to go."

"Don't leave me, don't leave me!"

"Those were my words to you not so long ago. Let me go, Jack. I have shot myself so that, if there is another life, I may be with her before Frank. I want to ask her not to go away from me again. Do you understand, dear lad? I haven't seen her for twenty-five . . . years. Don't be . . . selfish. But I shan't go in peace unless you promise me never to leave the farm. Promise."

"I promise," sobbed young Ashley.

"You are safe . . . among the trees. And I shall know that my story won't be repeated. Kiss me, Jack."

Young Ashley kissed the damp forehead. "Father, father!" he cried.

The feeble arm slipped away from his neck.

Part II
THE WOMAN

CHAPTER I

LITTLE Mrs. Blundell—the beautiful Betty Blundell—addressed her envelope to Captain Evelyn Blundell, R.N., before she commenced her letter, which, in itself, proves that little Mrs. Blundell is no different from ninety-nine women out of a hundred.

In this way, also

“My very ownest Hubby-man,” she wrote, in her ridiculously pretty backward hand, with her fair small head on one side, her lips pursed up, her blue eyes slightly closed—“my very ownest Hubby-man, so you have got leave to come back to your lonely little wife at last, after three of the longest, dullest, most unhappy, most perfectly beastly years she has ever spent. Hurrah once, hurrah twice, hurrah three times, and one more hurrah for luck. I can’t tell you how delighted and how excited I am. I feel that if I were just an ordinary woman I should dash off and buy something I couldn’t afford, or go in for a course of face massage, or have my hair

waved by a Paris specialist. But then I'm not, you know, darling, am I? The next six weeks will seem longer even than the longest of these three years, each of which has been an age in itself. My dear old boy, how brown and bearded and tobaccoy you will be, won't you? And how you will purr, and rub your daily thinning head against your poor little missus's shoulder! (How many esses in missus's? I don't know!)

"Darling, I have done as you asked me to do. It was rather a wrench to leave town, and the few friends who helped to keep me bright and cheerful. But I love my man, oh, so dearly, dearie (you know that, don't you?), and I have let the flat for the rest of the summer to my old chum, Milly Cator, who knows you, she says. She's nothing much to look at, but she's a genuine good sort, and I like her. She's the only woman in the world whom I would trust a yard. Also, like the best little wife in the world (and I am, aren't I, darling?), I have got exactly the rooms you described in which we are to spend our honeymoon Number Two. (I'm sitting in one of them now, having arrived this afternoon in time for tea.) You wanted to be five miles from any station—well, this is ten. You pined to be in the midst of wild, solitary country, where the abominable

swish of the sea is never heard. Very well, this is idiotically and insanely wild—almost dangerously so—as solitary as Bond Street in August, and nearly as green as a certain Evelyn used to be if ever I danced twice running with any other man. (Do you remember those dear, dear days?) Of course there is the usual village two miles off, which has the usual complement of Red Lions, Cats and Fiddles, and Rising Suns. Of course there is the usual green, whose daisies scraggy horses eat, never seeming to grow any less scraggy. Of course there are the usual generally bootless children, with siren voices and neglected noses; the usual old men, sans teeth, sans eyes, sans everything; the usual women with curvature of the spine from so constantly bending over the furrows.

“No one has ever even heard of the sea. At least they look as though they hadn’t, which is pretty nearly the same thing. And I don’t *think* there is a Salvation Army. I didn’t hear anything of it as I drove through in a buggy which ought to have been a dog-cart, drawn by a horse which ought to have been a pony. In any case, you may make your mind easy as to shops. For although there is a bootmaker, a tallow-chandler, a postmaster, a fly-paper merchant, a fishmonger, an oilman, a

sweet-stuff manufacturer, a linen-draper, a tailor, a greengrocer, a baker, a tobacconist, and a butcher—his name is Inskip—and let me warn you against knocking your head as you go in—down three wooden steps—and please see that you don't tread on the kittens. At present there are seven.

"There is no bathroom here (do you mind my babbling on, darling, it's the next best thing to talking to you, which is the best thing in the whole wide world); but they tell me there is a hose, and that our nearest neighbour is a farmêr a mile away.

"The good people are as good as usual, though not a whit better; have acres of kitchen garden, two children—boy and girl—a grandmother, a wire-haired terrier, who, or which, has its chin on my foot at this moment, and a great collection of pigs somewhere about. My window is open, and the breeze tells me so.

"They are open-eyed at all my luggage, have never had lodgers before, have never been to London—though the good woman's brother is a plumber at Whitechapel, with twins and bronchitis—have no piano, no books, and nothing to read except a well-selected collection of texts, which hang in clusters over my bed. So far, I have only committed murder once, and that was superfluous,

as it was merely a lady-bird. I am not much of a naturalist yet.

"By the way, did I tell you our nearest neighbour is a farmer a mile away? How I am going to kill time till you come, I can't conceive. You know how I hate the country. I think I shall sit under a tree all day, and imagine that your head is on my knee. At any rate, I shall attend every service at the village church to pray that nothing may happen to my dearest husband.

"And so, good-bye, darling. I will write to you at the various places you say you will call at on your homeward voyage, and with all my love, every little bit of it, now and for ever.—Your own

"BETTY.

"*P.S.*—Hurry, hurry, hurry, 'cos I wants yer mighty badly yes, I does, I does, I do."

CHAPTER II

AND again in this way :

"MY DARLING MILLY,—Before I do anything else, I feel I must write and thank you for being such a brick. If you hadn't taken my flat just when you did, old girl, I should have been regularly in the proverbial cart. But of course, having been away, you don't know the circumstances which led to my being obliged to evacuate the untenable position, do you? Well, I'll tell you, if you will swear by all you hold sacred—if there is anything in the world you *do* hold sacred—to tear this letter up directly you have read it.

"You remember that before you went away at the beginning of the season Reggie Rawnsley brought a man named Worthing, Valentine Worthing, to the flat to tea? Do you? The man with the face of a Greek god, and the body of a Satyr, whom we had both noticed got up to represent Cupid at the Carnival at Prince's? That tea

was the first of many teas, many dinners, many suppers. You know I always liked books I couldn't understand, and people—by people I mean men—it was impossible to see through at a first glance. I liked Valentine for that very reason. He puzzled me. I couldn't make out whether he knew nothing or everything. When I looked at his simply beautiful face, so open, so frank, so regular, so unlined, so—but it isn't the word I want—innocent, and then glanced down at his almost humped back, his claw-like hands, his withered little legs, I felt bound to get at the bottom of him, to study him, to find out to the last inch just what manner of man he was.

“I dropped Reggie Rawnsley — (it was more difficult than I thought. The silly boy said his heart would break, and that I had made him loathe women! How absurd that every *young* man should say the same thing under the same circumstances!) and concentrated my attention on Valentine Worthing. When I look back upon the duel we fought, my heart palpitates as though I had been fool enough to run a mile. I retired from the world, gave up all engagements, and spent my days at the flat, and my evenings at places where society doesn't congregate. We were inseparable. He would be

with me about midday, half an hour after his advance-guard, a florist's shop-load of flowers. Till six o'clock he would sit at the piano, playing the most exquisite airs to me, and singing little strange, pathetic songs that crept into my veins and filled me with electricity, and made me cry like a baby. If ever he spoke—and he rarely did speak—he would say little simple, boyish, enthusiastic things about art and literature and religion, the kind of things one can imagine a convent girl saying. Then, about six o'clock every evening he would climb off the music-stool, give a great sigh, touch my hand almost reverently with the tips of his fingers, and go home to dress. At eight o'clock the bell would ring, and I would go down and find him waiting for me in his brougham, scented and curled, no longer the Greek god, but an old blasé man, with leering eyes, and keen, witty, blasphemous, epigrammatic tongue. And we would dine together, and go to some out-of-the-way music-hall and then have supper. The whole time he would never cease talking—tearing every good old-fashioned thing to shreds, heaping ridicule on chastity, faith, love, honesty; pouring scorn on the idea of a future life, and gradually filling me with dread, loathing, and contempt.

“Then he would drive me home, stand for a

moment gripping my hand in both his own, looking at me with eyes in which there was a kind of lurking sneer, and then leave me — trembling, limp, disgusted, with all my flesh cockled, as though a bat had touched my mouth with its wing. Every night I determined I would never see him again. I even went so far, ten or eleven times, as to tell Jane on no account to let him come in again. But every morning his flowers would come with some little, simple, respectful greeting written upon a card, and, filled with curiosity to see what his mood would be, I would tell Jane to let him in the moment he arrived. And so it went on. Every day he would play and sing, and make me cry, every night he would fill me with nausea. And the extraordinary thing about him was that when he disgusted and frightened me most, then was his fascination most strong. But at last it had to end. One night coming home in his carriage. . . . Pouf! I can't write it; it makes me ill. When I got home I packed up all my things, left the keys with Jane, and caught the workmen's train—they must have taken me for a mad woman, although I must own I looked awfully sweet with a most becoming pallor on my cheeks, and my eyes wide open, and *very* blue—to Didcot. I waited at an

hotel till a respectable time of day, and then drove over to my father-in-law's place, some miles out. He is a Dean, you know, and most ridiculously rural. I thought that, if I put myself, metaphorically speaking, upon a diet of beer, the constant taste of absinthe would leave me.

"And then I got Evelyn's letter, in which he said he was coming home, and of course that was a blow. I did think he was pretty sure to give me another free year. However, I mustn't grumble. The three years he has been away have been the happiest years of my life. Do you remember my saying to you two minutes after he had left the house—his eyes were full of tears—as soon as I was able to stop sobbing that I would live every moment of my life till he came back? My goodness, Milly, I have lived them too! I have!

"You really were a dear to take the flat directly I wired to you. Evelyn wanted me to get rooms in some very quiet country place, and wait for him, for the honeymoon Number Two. (Goodness! how I laughed.) And here I am in about the most benighted, God-forgotten place upon the map, I verily believe. Of course, it's very lovely and all that, but you know my idea of scenery—the sky-

line of the Knightsbridge houses as seen any morning from the Row.

"Of course I shouldn't have left town at all, but for Valentine Worthing.

"What I am going to do to kill time here I can't conceive. There is not even a resident parson in the place! There is, I am glad to hear, a farmer living a mile away. Perhaps, only perhaps, he may be worth studying. Well, good-bye till to-morrow. I'll let you know how I get on. In six weeks' time all fun will be at an end, and I shall no longer be a . . . is free agent a good word?—Yours,

"BETTY."

CHAPTER III

LITTLE Mrs. Blundell threw her pen down, rose and stretched herself, yawning in a bored way, yawning as a martyr yawns.

For a moment she stood in the middle of the slanting-ceilinged room, upon the square patch of hideously cheap carpet, and tried to imagine that she could hear the never-ending hansom jingling by, the sound of the shrill, impatient cab-whistle, the jolting of 'bus-wheels, the nasal voices of brisk tradesmen, the cockney twitterings of sparrows.

For a moment she stood with closed eyes trying to see the misshapen figure of Valentine Worthing perched upon a piano-stool, flooding the air with minor chords, and piercing her heart with his plaintive notes. For a moment, with her arms flung out, her head thrown back, her eyes sparkling with excitement and dare-devilry, she tried to persuade herself that her husband had only a moment ago left her for three years, that for three

long, delightful, unhampered years the world, the hitherto unexplored world, was hers to discover.

In the garden behind the cottage a baby started crying, and reality forced its huge hob-nailed boot into the door and drove make-believe ignominiously out of the window. Before the baby had been hushed and soothed into silence, Mrs. Blundell's eyes were hard and discontented again.

It was all so quiet, so unexciting, so lethargic. In the place of all the dear, familiar noises of London, there were only to be heard the soothing swish of the blades of corn rubbing shoulders under the gentle hand of the breeze; the quiet cooing of doves on the roof; the distant music of sheep-bells playing an unaccompanied quartet; the occasional crowing of some egotistical cock, and the murmur of admiration from the hens who formed his harem; the bumpings and dumpings of a bustling housewife about the kitchen below; the happy growlings of a bunch of puppies biting each other's ears; the intermittent song of a boy digging in the kitchen garden; the all-pervading murmur of the midsummer bee.

But above all these irritating sounds there was one which got upon Betty Blundell's nerves until she felt like screaming or breaking something. It was the

regular hush-hush-hush which came into the window at the other end of the room, the window which looked out upon the placid garden of the cottage.

For a moment she stood listening to it, wondering what idiot could be doing it. Then, as it continued with almost the regularity of the swinging of a pendulum, she gave a gasp of anger, and with the blood eddying about her brain, hurried across the room to the window to shout at the person who could be doing it only on purpose to upset her already tingling nerves.

With her beautiful face distorted with irritation Betty put her head out of the open window, flinging aside the screen of honeysuckle which hung down over it.

Leaning anxiously over a cradle, her young eyes filled with maternal concern, looking down at the flushed and creased face of a great baby boy, stood a little rough-shod girl of nine or ten. Her lips were wide apart hushing loudly as with both hands she dandled the cradle to and fro, beating time with one of her feet.

The lines of irritation gradually died out of Betty's face and an expression of great interest came instead. With intense curiosity she watched every movement made by the little girl, noted every look

that came into her eyes. How, after vigorously hushing for a quarter of an hour, she suddenly bent over the baby's face, and while still rocking the cradle as regularly as ever, listened eagerly to its breathing. How, apparently not quite satisfied that sleep had come, she touched, still rocking, but more gently now—the lids of the baby's eyes with the tips of her finger. How, with fierce eyebrows and threatening eyes, she raised a peremptory finger at one of the pups which, tumbling head over heels out of the house, made a wobbly dash at her calf. And how, finally, hushing no longer, she stopped the rocking of the cradle, gave a tender touch to the blanket about the baby's ears, and crept quietly, standing still every now and then to listen, into the house.

“How extraordinary it is,” said Betty to herself; “she couldn't be more patient if the thing were her own. I wonder why I wasn't born a mother like that little country girl. . . . Fancy me, a mother! . . .”

CHAPTER IV

SUDDENLY Betty Blundell's expression of settled boredom changed to one of wide-awake surprise and curiosity.

The bow-window in the front room into which she had returned, peered through thickly-climbing roses into the road. Along this road, which begun at the farm and ended at the village Whiteleys, swung one of the hugest, broadest-shouldered, biggest-footed, best-looking men little Mrs. Blundell had ever seen.

As he came level with the window, his profile, slightly shaded by a dark tweed cap, stood out in clean-cut strength against the unclouded sky. As he moved, always with the same long, well-oiled stride, a pair of keen eyes scanned every other blade of rapidly-yellowing corn with pride, affection, and paternal anxiety.

Betty ran to the door quickly. "Mrs. Weeks, Mrs. Weeks!"

From the distance came the sound of a flat iron

dropped, with evident fluster, upon its metal stand, followed by a shuffling of heavy feet.

"Mrs. Weeks!"

"Yes'm."

The voice, oily and deferential, and filled with concern, came from the narrow, winding stairs.

"Come quickly. I want to speak to you."

Mrs. Blundell had thrown the window higher, had moved the bamboo table away, and was leaning out, framed in roses.

With panting breath, and with her apron twisted round her plump bare arms, Mrs. Weeks hurried in.

"Mrs. Weeks," said little Mrs. Blundell, her voice vibrating with excitement, "come to the window quickly, look out to the right, and tell me who that gentleman is in brown boots and gaiters."

Flushed, billowy, shiny Mrs. Weeks did as she was bid. Almost at once she drew in her head, turning a hearty laugh into a respectful cough.

"That be no gentelman, 'm. That be just furrmurr."

"Do you mean the usual kind of thing?"

"Sames always, 'm."

"Do you mean a man who grows potatoes and cabbages, and all that?"

"An' corrn, an' burreley, an' oerrts," said Mrs. Weeks, with her Sunday smile, "an' that loike, that's

it, 'm." Then, drawing her muscular, sunburnt arm from beneath its hiding-place, she pointed out of the window. "That's 'is corn opposite, an' 'is furrm's down the road." Whereupon, suddenly remembering that her arm was bare, she murmured a confused apology, blushed painfully, giggled, and thrust her arm out of sight again.

Mrs. Blundell had said "Really; dear me!" in a vacant, polite way, and had gone back to the window.

With her dainty elbows on the sill she leant her chin on both her hands. The clustering roses, tumbling into bloom over each other's shoulders, scrambled to touch her hair. With her blue eyes slightly screwed up, she followed the swinging figure of the big, muscular man until, passing between the two fields of corn which waved their heads towards him with affectionate deference, he grew smaller and smaller, became a smudge, a stain, a speck upon the enormous golden sea, and disappeared.

Round Mrs. Blundell's delicate mouth there crept a tinge of smile. In her eyes a growing expectation and curiosity, mingled with relief and surprise.

She turned to Mrs. Weeks, who, it was plain to see, was itching to talk, and gave her an encouraging smile.

"He certainly doesn't look a bit like one's idea of a farmer," she said. "If you hadn't told me so,

—and of course, you know—I should have said that he was a soldier.”

While she made these remarks in her deliciously soft voice and clear, almost precise enunciation, Mrs. Blundell unstrapped a leather case of manicure implements, sat down by the side of the table, carefully spread a white cloth over her knees, and commenced to rub a pink paste upon her exquisitely-shaped nails.

“I shall want a bowl of boiling water—quite boiling—if you please, Mrs. Weeks.”

With an air of disappointment at being dismissed before she could enter upon a nice talk with the wonderful lady from London, Mrs. Weeks turned hastily towards the door.

“But there is no immediate hurry,” added Mrs. Blundell. “Sit down and tell me about the farmer. I like to take an interest in everyone who happens to live where I may be staying.”

“Oh, thank you, 'm,” murmured the gratified woman, gladly subsiding into a chair.

She preened herself, and swallowed once or twice, and folded her capable arms into her apron, and rustled like a hen preparing for an earth-bath. Mrs. Blundell noticed that she crossed her feet primly as she had seen little school-girls do in village schools

when the Vicar had personally conducted her on a tour of inspection. The elastic spring of her boots had worn out, and the tips of once bright patent leather had turned brown. And Mrs. Blundell wondered how any man could bring himself to marry any woman with things so large and ungainly.

"Let us begin with his name," she said, smiling with immense condescension.

"Hashley, 'm," said Mrs. Weeks.

"Hashley? Quite an uncommon name, at any rate."

"No, 'm, beggin' your pardon. Not Hashley—but Hashley."

"Oh, Ashley. I see!"

Mrs. Weeks smiled at her lodger indulgently.

"Yes, that's it, 'm, Hashley. 'E were called young Mr. Hashley until 'is father were took—leastways, 'e weren't took, as you may say. Properly speakin', 'e went."

Betty Blundell looked politely puzzled. "I don't *think* I quite . . ."

"By that I mean, 'm, as 'ow 'e didn't die a nat'ral death same as I 'ope and trust, with God's blessing, you and me will, 'm. . . ."

"Thank you, Mrs. Weeks."

Mrs. Weeks looked round the little room with an air of mystery and lowered her voice.

"No, 'm, hold Mr. Hashley, as 'e were allays called—why, I don't rightly know, seein' as 'ow 'e were not hold as hold is reckoned in these parts—a fine, hupstandin' man, not a day mor'n fifty, if as much—Alf, that's my 'usband, stood out again Mr. Burrage, 'im as keeps the 'H'Angler,' wot you may 'ave noticed on the right-'and side of the Green a-comin' up, with geraniums in the winder-boxes, and a notice as to accommodation for motors, as only one 'as ever bin through, and a fine stir it did make in the place, to be sure,—as 'ow the departed were forty-height; but has there were no line on the stone to say so, of course the two shillin' never changed 'ands, an' glad I were, 'm, seein' as 'ow two shillin' is two shillin' in these crool times, an' . . ."

"What did he do, then?" asked Mrs. Blundell.

"'E shot 'isself, 'm, on the day as 'ow 'e got a letter with a mournin' band from far-off parts."

Mrs. Blundell shuddered and put some of the pink paste on her finger, which she then carefully removed.

"Why?"

"Ah, no one knows, 'm, nor dared arst Mr. John, who spoke not a word of any sort or kind to a living creature for two months an' four days."

"And is John the only son?"

"Ah, 'm, 'ow do we know as 'ow Mr. John *is* a son?"

"Oh, there is a mystery about that, is there?"

"Not wat you may call a mystery, 'm, but a nat'ral anxiety. The departed did arrive at the furrm twenty-five years ago with Mr. John as a baby. That's not denied, and lot's o' talk there were at the time, that's true, seein' as 'ow hold Mr. Hashley bought out Mr. Jenkins, whose fam'ly 'ad bin there gettin' on fer two 'undred year, an' all, an' 'e did call the infant 'my son'; that I know for a first-'and fact, because Mrs. Sloke, wot with 'er old man, by which I mean 'usband, 'm,—'as done for 'em up at the furrm from the first, is my haunt on my Alf's side, 'as a-told me so many time, an' a fine place it 'as bin for 'em too, that's certain, only two to do for, an' them mostly out an' about, an' not fussy heaters neither, an' no company, not a soul ever crossin' the threshold these five-an'-twenty year, an' only a letter once in a way so as to make it the talk o' the village."

"Strange people, Mrs. Weeks."

"Ah, you may say so, 'm, an' keep to theirselves too, like the 'ermits of the past, but kind to the furrm 'ands, for all that, an' no lack of money neither, all the himplements on the furrm comin' down from London as new as possible, same as no one else 'ad for miles round, and some 'ad never seen afore.

Suspicious things, some of 'em, wot made small work of a corn-field, laying of it out, when ripe, in a manner not easy to fathom."

Mrs. Blundell, listening attentively, began to rub her nails lightly with a pad.

"I suppose Mr. Ashley and his son went to London for these things from time to time?"

"Went to London, 'm?" echoed Mrs. Weeks. "If you'll believe me—and I speak the Gospel truth, so 'elp me, an' why shouldn't I, 'avin' no purpose to serve for or against—these two were never known to leave the furrm the 'ole time, no, nor pass through the village neither, unless to ride or drive to the station to give orders as to one of the himplements of wot I've spoke, mostly these journeys being left to Mr. Sloke, who did all the outside work, such as seein' to the sales, and takin' the animals to market, and such like; and well 'e sold too, bein' a capable feller, born and bred to the work and likin' it and them as 'e served, and repeatin' nothin', not so much as to give a key to them as were interested, nor my haunt neither, which is curious, seein' as 'ow she were a big talker as a girl."

"But surely," asked Mrs. Blundell, busily polishing, "some female relations of the father paid a visit at one time or another?"

"Never a suspicion of a lady were known to enter that there 'ouse, 'm, I can vouch," said Mrs. Weeks firmly.

"But was old Mr. Ashley a widower, then?"

"Ah, 'm, who can tell?" said Mrs. Weeks, shaking her head. "From one little thing an' another wot I pieced together like, an' from lookin' closely at hold Mr. Hashley's face when 'e *did* pass the cottage, it's my opinion as 'ow 'e nursed a wrong—ah, an' others bore me out in that too—even haunt, when I did get 'er to speak about it, which was onest, when she come 'ere for a bite after 'elpin' to lay my little Alf to rest, as was carried off with the croop—poor little mite!—aged two, and 'im as weighed two ounces more when newly born than any other male infant since '64, in these 'ere parts, and proud I were, though modest being my first, wot come upon me sooner than 'e ought, as tradition goes, my Alf bein' a wheedlin' lover, wot never took no for an answer, beggin' your pardon, 'm, for alludin' to such matters, at which I look back now with hindulgence, there bein' only a little chaff at the time, an' a very usual thing with h'onest people who 'ad fixed the day, an' that."

"And so," said Mrs. Blundell, "young Mr. Ashley has never met a—a person like myself in all his life, I take it?"

"Like you, 'm," cried Mrs. Weeks, her voice filled with genuine admiration, "never! Poor feller, I don't reely believe as 'ow he dreams as such creatures are—meanin' creatures in its best sense, 'm, that I do assure you—having reely better have said ladies in their own right. If you ask me, 'm, I do think that the sight of you would fairly rumple young Mr. Hashley—yes, even 'im, as looks so determined and closed in, as I call it, an' always in bearin' reins, so to speak."

Mrs. Weeks gave an involuntarily chuckle, which she quickly, with slightly heightened colour, turned into a discreet cough.

Mrs. Blundell laughed a ripple of effortless laughter, in which there was a note of excitement, and half turning her back to her landlady, commenced touching things on the bamboo table, in the way civilised women have of letting one know that they have had enough of one. With that peculiar instinct which is born and not bred in women, Mrs. Weeks murmured that her iron would be getting cold, and made her way to the door.

"Oh, and Mrs. Weeks, don't forget the boiling water, and I should like tea about nine o'clock, please, in a nice big pot. The dinner was excellent. I am just going for a little walk."

The heavy, pleased, flat footsteps of Mrs. Weeks sounded on the stairs. In the kitchen below began the deep rumble of a man's voice, the noise of a poker thrust into a fire, and the pattering of children's feet upon a red-tiled floor. Without, sparrows chattered in the ivy, a quiet breeze rubbed the roses together, the distant tinkle of a sheep-bell floated imperceptibly by.

Little Mrs. Blundell put her letters into the pocket of an expensively-simple muslin frock, and crossed the sloping floor of her oak-beamed sitting-room into her bedroom. She emerged from it, after quite a little while, with a smile on her lips, and a very clever, poppy-covered hat set upon a head of hair which rivalled the ripest corn.

"No," she said aloud, standing on a chair to get a full-length glimpse of herself in the square of cheap looking-glass over the narrow mantel-board—"no, I don't fancy it will be so difficult to kill time here after all."

And then, with her sweet face glowing, her eyes dancing, and carrying her head slightly on one side, like an analytical chemist starting on a new experiment, Betty Blundell tripped downstairs, and took the turning to the right.

CHAPTER V

SEVERAL times a year, during the twenty-five odd years of his outlandish life, John Ashley had passed along the road which ran, under the best parlour window of Mrs. Weeks' cottage, from his farm to the village. At first mostly on a wiry, electrical pony, or with quick, eager, boyish steps; later, on a stout, unpretentious mare of slate-roofed hue, or with the steady, long, set-teeth swing, which had brought something of the devil into Mrs. Blundell's big blue eyes.

Since the death of his father, alone, sometimes restlessly, impatiently, but always to the letter, his life had been spent in the carrying out of his promise.

So it came to pass that John Ashley, at twenty-five odd years of age, had never left his village.

Nature, his books, his fields, his animals, and his memory had been Ashley's only companions since his father's death. Since then he had spoken merely to his farm hands, to other farmers, to buyers, to his

old pensioners in the village, and the few villagers themselves. He had never seen a woman of his own class—a woman who wore silk linings to her skirts; and he had no wish, no desire to do so. John Ashley, unique among men, was contented with his lot. He had no other ambitions than to see his crops ripen, to keep his animals healthy, to sell his sheep well, to sleep soundly at night. Nature was his one intimate friend and companion. Her fickle moods exercised a peculiar fascination. He never grew tired of her, never grew angry with her. She was his mistress and his master. He found even in her tyranny and bad temper something to admire and wonder at. In her beauty and peacefulness and prodigality everything to worship.

Of so-called civilisation as practised in cities he knew nothing. From the echoes of it that reached him in his solitude it seemed to him to be a strange and hopeless chaos. He knew nothing of the lies, the humbug, the jealousies, the misrepresentations, the vulgarity of party politics; nothing of modern literature or of the drama. He never saw a newspaper or followed the impotent efforts of scientists to alter the laws of Nature. Of wars, of creeds, of theories, he knew nothing. That much-abused word religion conveyed nothing to

his mind. Of the Bible story he was, happily, entirely ignorant. His belief in a Creator, all powerful, all wise, all loving, all merciful, was, therefore, rock-like. The simplicity of his belief was never interfered with and undermined by the masses of man-made rules and foolish creeds which are the curses of an egotistical and charlatan age. His church was the open field, the sun and moon his parsons.

With her characteristic nimbleness of mind, the beautiful Betty Blundell had filled in the spaces between the lines of information she had drawn from Mrs. Weeks. John Ashley was new. The study of a new thing, when it was male, was always interesting to her. The study of John Ashley would keep boredom, the worst of all evil spirits, at arm's length. So little Mrs. Blundell, who hated walking, took the turning to the right.

CHAPTER VI

SHE followed the corn-lined road until, within a quarter of a mile from the village, it ran up a hill. Here she branched off the road into a field, tree-topped, where there was a gap.

Looking down upon a clump of irregular red roofs grouped, chicken-wise, under the wing of their mother church, she stopped, tired, expectant, amused and resourceful.

The sun was setting. There was a sudden hush in the world. A solitary crow, flying quickly, left a harsh jar in the air. The silver tongue of the ancient church, wailing the death of one hour, singing the birth of another, instantly corrected it.

That was all. The whole sky seemed to have been slashed at with a sharp knife. From under the surface of it there welled up streaks of blood which trickled about the cuts, staining everything a deep crimson. Insidiously, the trees became tinted in it, the weeds and bracken and shaking grass, the thin white line of road, the corn on

each side. The windows of the church and of the cottages in the village suddenly flared as though the rooms they lighted were on fire.

Little Mrs. Blundell saw none of this. Shading her eyes with a delicate little hand, she watched the road below steadily, eagerly, impatiently.

A speck on the white appeared, turned into two, grew into a tired horse and weary man, and left the road for a meadow on the left. Then nothing.

Another speck! Little Mrs. Blundell bent forward as though to give her eyes less distance to peer through. The silver bell marked off another quarter. A quick smile came suddenly to Betty's face. She could now recognise the height, the breadth, the slow, swinging stride of the man placed upon earth to amuse her till the novelty of him wore off, or until it became necessary to drop him for reasons of a diplomatic nature.

She watched him slowly grow larger, and suddenly stop. Leaning on a stile which led to a footpath from the road up the hill on which she stood, and back again, he seemed to be watching something intently. Mrs. Blundell saw nothing to look at—no animal, no person. Surely he couldn't be looking at the sunset, a man who had seen nothing but sunsets since he was born?

What a strange effect the country seemed to have upon people. Bother sunsets! Why didn't he come? The dew would fall presently, she supposed. It generally did in those kind of places, and her muslin would be ruined.

Why on earth was he taking off his cap? Was there some woman in the field whom she couldn't see? Apparently not. He still had his chin tilted upwards. Sentimental, forsooth, for all his inches. Artistic, too, she supposed. So much the better. He would appreciate the dip of her hat, the exquisite outline of her face, the great soul-depth of her deep blue eyes. She gathered that he had never seen any other women than women with aprons round their arms, with rolling r's.

How should she break herself upon him. Which way would be most effective?

Everything depended, she argued, as to which way he came up the hill, whether by the road or the footpath. She hoped the walk had not disorganised the tiny curls upon her forehead. With a wet finger she smoothed her eye-brows, lightly and expertly sent home the hair-pins which had worked out of their places. She bent down and shook the dust from the edge of her frock.

When she looked down the hill again, Ashley

had moved. He was on the footpath between the waving grasses. His hands were behind his back, and his lips were moving. Very likely, Mrs. Blundell supposed, with a smile, repeating something out of those wretched books upon which he wasted so much money.

The problem was how to be most effective. Should she sit down and wait till he appeared on the side of the hill, and then ask him the way to the post-office? Or should she stand on the tip-top of the hill, blocking the path he was following, outlined against the sky, flecked with the now paling red?

On came the man of Nature, head up, arms behind, long, slow, swinging stride.

Against the sky, directly in his way, with wide-open, simple eyes, waited the little woman of the world like a white, risen moon.

CHAPTER VII

“ . . . No words of mine, my dear Milly, can convey the very least idea of the intense enjoyment that moment gave me. Even now—I have been back three hours—I can feel in my back that pleasant thrill which an exquisite bar of music or a big moment in a well-written play always causes. Do you know? A sort of tingling—a fillip to that part of one which is genuinely sympathetic and responsive.

“ I didn’t look at him for some minutes—seconds, I suppose—in cold, accurate English. Apparently my eyes were fixed on the sky with that hungry, dreamy, girlish look, which it took me so long to acquire, and which has come in most usefully on many former occasions. Nevertheless, I saw him stop with a great gasp, and stand with his huge arms hanging loosely at his sides, looking at me as though I were a will-o’-the-wisp, a vapour, a live poem. I wore that muslin I got for the Veyseys’ garden-party, transparent at the neck—

they call it neck—and arms, and the poppy hat everybody raved about so much and copied—the beasts. All Nature seemed to be helping me too. The faint red glow, the green at my feet, the clear gold behind me. I felt like one of those angels painted on tinted tessellated stuff over the little altar in one of those funny side-chapels in what's the name of the church in Rome? I believe that if I could have kept it up, we should still be there. But I wanted the extra satisfaction of seeing what he would do when I looked into his eyes. So—oh, my dear, how thankful I am that Providence decided I should be a girl—I gave myself a little shake, as though I had suddenly fallen to earth, and with one of my best wide-eyed looks of intense, fearless innocence, suddenly met his gaze.”

Little Mrs. Blundell put down her pen, knocked the ash off her cigarette, drew the soft folds of her night-dress more closely round her, and threw back her head with a quiet, silvery peal of laughter.

“I really thought he would have fallen down,” she wrote, after a moment, bending her dimpling face over the table again. “In all my life, in the

whole course of my experience, I never felt so thoroughly warmed and contented with myself. It was like, I take it, a sudden, prolonged burst of applause from a packed theatre, or a eulogistic criticism in the pages of some really important paper. I am one of those women, thank Heaven!—or whatever it is one ought to thank in such a case—who has the power of tempting men. Well, the use of that power has always been my pleasure and delight. I love to watch the gradual transformation which takes place, to see your calm, assured, unruffled man become uncomfortable, to watch the blood rush to his brain, to see his hands twitch, and the veins beat and flutter on his temples, the queer look come into his eyes—especially when there is some quite solid piece of furniture between us. I suppose there is something of the mermaid about me, because, having tempted to the top of my bent, I then splash cold water over the man with my tail, and slip away into the sea. I have often before been surprised at the effect I have created, but never till to-night have I felt quite so—what shall I say—gratified. I think that's the word I mean. Really, never. I wish you could have seen my wild man of the woods. His mouth fell open, his eyes seemed to start out of his head,

and his heart jumped and beat, and panted—I could see it in his neck.

“For just a second I confess I was scared. He is so big, so strong, so—so untutored, so much a child of Nature, that for a moment I thought he might catch hold of me and—well, I took my eyes away, and went quickly past him down the hill.

“I was afraid to turn at first to see what he was doing, because, of course, I thought he would be looking after me. They usually do, you know. But finally, as I didn't wish to lose any of the enjoyment of the thing, I stooped down, pretending to pick some grass, and looked back under my arm. My dear, he hadn't moved! There he was, just as I had left him, with his back to me, his arms still hanging at his sides, his shoulders heaving.

“If anyone had given me a rope of pearls, I don't believe I could have been more pleased. You know, after one has been at it for three whole, well-filled years, and begun to think that perhaps some of one's power has gone, it really is delightful to find, so quite too convincingly, that the power is there in all its abundance. Don't you think so?

“As I looked, he moved, pulled himself together, and staggering like a man who wakes from a sleeping-draught, went away—never once looking back. I

wonder if he still thinks I came from the sky? I say sky, because it sounds better than the other word I was thinking of. I remember being awfully pleased once because Reggie Rawnsley—dear old Reggie!—suddenly shook me quite violently and told me I was a she-devil. Funny thing to be pleased about, wasn't it?"

CHAPTER VIII

PUTTING the letter into its envelope, little Mrs. Blundell took up a hand-glass, and holding it in both her hands, with her elbows resting on the table, looked into it earnestly. There were four candles behind it, and although the window was wide open, their wicks burnt straight and unwaveringly.

The night was hot and breathless. No sound broke its deep stillness. The moon in her first quarter hung sharp against a sky clotted with stars. Beyond the narrow white road and the wide stretch of sleeping corn, a line of poplars stood, with every branch cut clear against the pale blue. The scent of honeysuckle and syringa crept into the room.

Among the cheap and hideous china figures which stood everywhere—upon the frail sideboard, upon the slip of mantel-board, upon the bamboo brackets placed primly in the angles of the wall, among the hard-seated chairs over whose backs hung stiff, white lace antimacassars tied with vivid pink ribbon, the

oleographs of podgy angels, out-of-proportion race-horses, children with dogs, and the while-you-wait photographs of engaged couples, fathers and mothers, widows and their sons—the exquisitely dainty woman in her belaced night-dress and Indian slippers, looked like a diamond set in brass.

She broke into a sudden laugh and commenced, with the air of one who conscientiously goes through a form of daily exercise, to practise a series of facial expressions. She pursed up her mouth, opened her eyes wide, and raised her eyebrows.

“How *can* you?” she said aloud. Then she let her mouth become tremulous and her eyes tender. “Must you *really* go?” she said.

And then, with the quickness of lightning, she closed her lips into a short, straight line, let her eyebrows meet in the middle, and half closed her eyes.

“Pray don’t run away with the notion that I *want* you to stay,” she said coldly.

She tried this expression several times, with slight alterations, additions, and emendations, and then changed it to one of intense sympathy and interest and rapt attention.

“Tell me about yourself,” she said.

Apparently satisfied with that, she threw a gleam

of challenge into her eyes, held back her head, with her lips slightly apart, and said :

"No, I never allow any man to kiss me—except my husband."

Slow, heavy steps passed along the hard road.

With the quickness of a minnow, and with all its elastic grace, she darted to the window and leant out.

It was Ashley, passing along with his arms behind him, eyes to the ground.

Betty watched him until he became merged into the shadows, and the echo of his steps had died away.

Then she drew in her head, with laughing, eager eyes gathered up her writing-case, and crossed to her bedroom. On the way she stopped involuntarily before a calendar.

"Only ten days," she cried. "Only ten days, and he is so . . . so unexplored ! But he no longer looks at the sky, I notice."

She chuckled softly as she passed into her bedroom.

CHAPTER IX

IT was the following evening upon which Betty wrote again :

“I slept badly. I don’t think I ever remember to have slept badly before. It was a new experience, and so I suppose I ought not to grumble. On the contrary, as my whole life is devoted to the search of things new, I ought to be glad. As a matter of fact, I grumbled horribly until I got out of bed and looked in the glass. I dreamt the most uncomfortable thing. I dreamt that the farmer had choked me, and that he had laid me down on the crest of a hill—our hill—and covered me with withered leaves. My husband ran up the hill, and stood looking at him, with the most peculiar expression in his eyes. Although I was dead I saw and heard everything. From what I remember of it now—a good deal has happened since this morning—I think John Ashley was out of his mind. He sat by me, smiling foolishly. All the strong lines round his mouth

seemed to have been loosened. He looked like a bronze statue over which somebody had put a thin layer of putty, as a practical joke. I remember being a little shocked at his sudden alteration. But I could have laughed at the careful way in which he put the leaves all over me. He didn't shovel them over me. He placed them gently, one by one, as though he were dressing a dinner-table. They really looked rather becoming on my white dress. If Evelyn is in funds when he comes back—only nine days now!—I shall get Friola to build me a white evening frock covered with copper-coloured leaves. I am sure it would be rather effective, with bronze shoes, and a wreath of the same leaves in my hair. But let me tell you how it seemed to me that Evelyn looked, before I forget. He looked like a man in blind-man's buff, when the handkerchief is taken off his eyes, and he finds himself facing people he thought were all behind him. He looked from Ashley to me, and from me to Ashley, as though he didn't really believe that we were there. You know Evelyn, don't you? You know that he is one of those short-necked men, who gets very red under great emotion, whose face swells, and who swears foully. All the veneer of civilisation cracks like cheap stucco on an old building, and underneath you see

—bricks! I expected to see him fling himself like an ape upon Ashley, and tear him limb from limb. He did swell and get red, and clench his fists, and cry out inarticulate blasphemy. But suddenly catching Ashley's eye, and finding in it no fear, no annoyance at being caught, he pulled himself up, and stooped over me.

“‘So you're one of that sort, are you?’ I heard him say, with disgust in his voice. ‘And he's choked you, has he, on finding it out? It saves me the trouble and serves you right!’

“I think I was more surprised than hurt. Evelyn is such an extremely well-bred person. But as he turned away to go down the hill, lurching like a man who wakes after a sleeping-draught, I did all I could to cry out to him to come back and kill Ashley horribly—and couldn't. My tongue felt like a huge garden roller. I strained and tugged and pushed, and couldn't move it. I suppose the effort woke me.

“I knew the whole thing was a dream, of course; but it seemed so real, so actual, that really for a moment or two, I was afraid to open my eyes in case I should see Ashley's inane face, and hear Evelyn — dear, fond, old bull-necked Evelyn — thudding down the hill. Was it the radishes? Or

was it the after-effect of one of those foolish novels I had been reading before going to sleep?

"But it doesn't matter. The point is, I had a new sensation. I dreamt for the first time in my life. Poor mother! The fact that I always slept well was one of her standing grievances. She used to get out of her glasses—generally tearing away pieces of hair-net—lay them down on her Bible—I am talking of the times when she was ill—and say, 'I can't get over it. You were the only one actually to see your poor father in the agonies of death, and yet you could come home from the hospital, have a good supper, go to bed and sleep like a baby.' *She* dreamt for weeks, poor old thing! No wonder she envied me!

"But the gift of being able to sleep after any worry or trouble is peculiarly mine. Why, even after that drive with Valentine Worthing—the very thought of which makes cold water run up and down my spine—I slept like a healthy school-girl after a tennis tournament. Excellent, isn't it?

"I ate three new-laid eggs this morning! They were like cream. I believe they were born on purpose for me. I must say that the whole place is most kind and obliging. It was very nice and fresh in the little sitting-room. The window was

wide open, and those common crowding white roses, which always remind me of servant girls in the fields on Sunday evenings, poked their heads in at me. They had put a great bunch of very red poppies into a pink glass vase, chipped at the bottom, on the table by the butter. They were mixed up with long, tall pieces of barley, and they were not unlike shiny-cheeked girls, blushing up into the faces of loutish soldiers. I suppose I felt poetical! And the sweet-peas were really quite sweet. I wished all the time that John Ashley could come in and see me. I must have looked so simple and harmless and wide-eyed. I wore that perfectly heavenly breakfast-gown that I took from Edith Dinting to settle her Bridge debts. Do you remember it? Hand-painted chiffon, and miles of lace—real lace, cut low at the throat, and falling away at the elbows. I know it rather tends to convey the impression that one is—what is that silly word that people use under the circumstances—interesting, isn't it? which, to me, takes a little of the gilt off the gingerbread. But after all, from what I hear and judge of Ashley, he's not so highly civilised as to possess a smart mind. He would only have taken in the picture as a whole. And as you know, my arms are very beautiful. I'm so glad I had the pluck to be vaccinated on the thigh

"I couldn't help thinking as I put on my morning frock, what small things are capable of changing one's entire mental attitude. Yesterday afternoon I loathed this place, with its quiet, its scents, its rural noises. I hated to feel off the map, and looked forward to the ten days here with that feeling of dread which, I imagine, a criminal feels at the beginning of a term of ten years.

"Think of me this morning. Think of me last night. Already I eye the calendar suspiciously to see that it doesn't cheat me out of a day. Oh, Milly, you don't know what it is to me to deliberately lay my little plans to fascinate a man—such a man!—or what exquisite pleasure it gives me to note the gradual effect they have upon him! I suppose a spider is the only animal which gets the same kind of satisfaction. Not that I wish to compare myself with an animal, or rather an insect, although, my dear, I am not much different from most beautiful women, and it's a futile argument to say that this kind of game—it is a kind of game—isn't animalish. Why, Eve did it! However, I don't care one way or the other. It's a free country, and one can take one's pleasures how one likes.

"I must know men pretty well, I think. I walked straight to the top of the hill where I met John

Ashley the other evening. I knew that either he would be already there, or that he would be there shortly. I found him already there! He was lying on his back with his head on his hands, asleep. He looked like Gulliver, at full stretch. I never saw such a really superb person. It made me feel about four inches long! I wondered, impishly, what he would say if I started running over him like a Liliputian, and I longed to tack him down to the earth so that he couldn't move, and then tickle him with a long piece of grass!

"He's wonderfully good-looking. His eyebrows are red, and his moustache—a large, soft-looking thing—is almost flaxen. It looks lighter than it really is because his skin is deeply tanned. His nose is too large, perhaps, but it is a good one, and shows breeding by its bridge. And I don't think I ever saw such a square, determined jaw. He was breathing as men breathe when they are in their second sleep—soundlessly. Indeed, I had to bend over him and listen, and look closely at his chest to make sure that it was only sleep. It might have been death, you know, and then my tiny ten days would have become ten weary months.

"I watched him for a long time, wondering how the effects of me would work upon him. He *is* such

virgin soil. I have never met his kind before. Evelyn, poor, dear old Evelyn, was so easy to manage. One's few quite elementary tricks were sufficient. When I made up my mind that I couldn't stand home—its dull, horrid routine, constant economy, everlasting living with the gas turned down—and that I would become Mrs. Blundell as a stepping-stone to London, I just let my knee rest against his as I drove to a dance at the Hall, sitting opposite to him in his uncle's hideously old-fashioned carriage, and afterwards, when we were sitting out in the summer-house, an imaginary spider had to be shaken out of my skirt, and my stockings were very pretty. He caught his breath when I decided the spider must have gone, and I managed, before I sat down, to undo the button of my shoe. When he rose from doing it up, there was a glitter in his blue eyes, and his hands trembled. I took care also that three other people should get into the old carriage with us going home, so that it became necessary for us to be very close together for some time; and several times, when we passed over a more than usually rutty part of the road, I held his hand very tight, without my glove, in a nervous, helpless way. He proposed to me while we waited on the steps for old Jane to open the door. His first kiss told me

how effective these just preliminary tricks had been. You must remember that Evelyn is one of those kind of men—they form the vast majority—who is very easily moved. For instance, a very few glasses of wine go to his head. He quite bellows at all the obviously bellowy parts of a play. You see, he rather runs to fat.

“With Reggie it was quite different. He is slight and tall and dark, and such things would have merely tended to disgust. With him it was dangerous to take the initiative. He liked the will-o'-the-wisp method—the elusive, the invitation in the eye, the quickly-erected fence. With him the impossible was the only thing to be desired. One had to play one's subtle tricks in his case, one's second-grade tricks. And with Valentine Worthing—who is the third type of man—there are only three—who is an artist at one moment, a Goth at the next, a mixture of the most refined and the coarsest sensualism, epicure and animal—one had to combine tricks belonging to the first and the second grades, according to his mood. But one had to exaggerate both. It was a good deal more trouble, and I can't tell you how much more dangerous to oneself, and consequently, how infinitely more enjoyable and worth one's while. Danger is the very backbone

of the game—a game which is, of course, utterly spoiled when a goal is scored.

“But what am I to do with this huge, untutored instrument? What chords, what runs, what discords am I to strike on his untouched keys? He is sensual, of course—all men are, especially the misogynist. He must have caught something of the sensualism of Nature, who is the lightest female of us all. Any man can be celibate who has never had the opportunity of being anything else. Opportunity proves the metal. I firmly believe that there would eventually be no such thing as animalism in men and women if we were taught to concentrate our whole power of creation upon things we had a taste for. The whole thing is merely an innate desire to create, and if we all did things—wrote, painted, sculpted, carved wood, bound books, made clothes; it doesn't matter—our animalism would be put into the work we performed, and we should all become celibate. Nature knows that well enough, though, and she has no desire to be left alone in the world as she found herself in the days before Adam and Eve trod upon her bosom. That's why, I suppose, animalism is called Nature by people who dislike to be called or to think themselves animals. Why shouldn't it? The deception has been allowed by the Church.

Marry, and animalism is blessed. Don't marry, and it is horribly immoral. The Church is the police force. It regulates the traffic.

"I think I must have stood by my boredom-dispeller for half an hour before I made up my mind that I should have to treat him as I treated Valentine Worthing. I came to the conclusion that there would be very little difference between these two men. They are both artists, both Goths, both epicures, both animals. It only happens that one has grown almost tired of creating, and the other hasn't yet begun to create. Therefore it means that I must combine the tricks of the first and second grades just as lightly with Ashley as I exaggerated them with Worthing. And even, practised lightly, I shall, thank goodness, be playing with fire. But I don't intend to get burnt! A burnt child dreads the fire. I am Evelyn Blundell's wife!

"Finally he began to show signs of waking—I think he must have been sitting all night where he first saw me—and I walked away keeping my back to him. I would have bet any money on his speaking to me, and I should have lost. When I looked round he had gone. I could see him running hard down the hill to his farm. He was not running away from me, though. He was running away from himself."

CHAPTER X

BETTY watched the farmer till he was out of sight, with a smile in which there was intense pleasure coupled with intense annoyance. She had meant to speak to him that morning, or get him to speak to her. So, while she thoroughly appreciated his retreat—it was, in such a man, an immense compliment, in that it proved that he couldn't trust himself in her neighbourhood—it meant that perhaps another day, or at any rate, several hours, would have to be killed alone, with no man to practise on.

She remembered that the letters arrived in the village at midday, and so she slowly retraced her steps. She made up her mind that she would sleep the afternoon away, and return to her spot in the evening. She was one of those women who always slept her afternoon away however busy she might be. She considered that it kept away wrinkles, and with her, as with most women, wrinkles are terrible things. She, like most women, had a great dread of looking her age, and would do without new dresses even, in order

to have face massage, or any other kind of treatment that would help to keep the youth in her face, and her figure—for naturally, her figure too came into the question of looking young. There is, perhaps, next to wrinkles and loose flesh, nothing a woman dreads more than spreading hips. And Betty, like most women, would undergo any discomfort, wear any distressing appliance through the night, if only she thought it would control fat, and put the clock back. She, like most women, spent many anxious moments in front of her full-length glass putting herself through a daily inspection, wondering, with a catch in her breath, whether this or that portion of her wasn't slightly larger, or slightly more lined to-day than yesterday. To this end she regulated her diet more carefully than any priest.

She found on the table of her little sitting-room a large packet from her friend, in which were enclosed all the letters which had been delivered at her flat since her absence. She noticed, with a smile, that the packet was addressed to Miss Blundell, and she thanked Heaven that Milly was a woman of imagination. She herself had meant to tell her landlady that she was unmarried. She knew intuitively that Ashley was one of those queer, old-fashioned persons who wouldn't allow

himself, from a sense of mistaken honour, to flirt with another man's wife, and this substitution on the part of Milly would save the trouble of telling a lie. Not that Betty objected, any more than any other woman, to tell a lie. But she preferred other people to do it for her, in the same way that she preferred other people to do her shopping and mend her clothes. The lie once told, she, like other women, found it quite easy to live up to. Indeed, deception was the breath of her nostrils. And yet she was in no sense a liar. She told the truth when it didn't matter, quite readily at all times. But she found life a little dull unless there was always something to hide from somebody. Something quite trivial, perhaps—a letter, the photograph of a man she knew her husband, her father, her brother objected to, little meetings with the same man, and others—but still something. It gave a fillip to her day which she found it quite impossible to do without. It supplied the place of constant nipping. There might be nothing in the letter her husband could possibly find to cavil at, except the usual terms of endearment which men put in their letters to most women to whom they write, just to pan it out, or because it has become a habit with them, such as “all love,” “with all my love,”

"girl dear," and other utterly insincere and stereotyped and meaningless things. But she chose to hide it in the same way as a dog hides a bone. It gave her a tinge of pleasure to go and dig it up when she thought that no one was looking.

No wise man objects to these little things in his womenkind. He knows very well how great a part the utterly small things play in their lives. He knows very well, however much he may love and respect them, that they cannot help themselves, and so are not to be blamed, any more than they can help having ears and toes and fingers. If, on the contrary, he *does* object to it, and makes himself unpleasant, he is worse than a fool—he is a madman, because he is taking away one form of food for their vanity; and if a man does not pander, in every way, to the insatiable appetite for vanity which is the great, all-pervading characteristic in the nature of many women, his happiness is at an end, and in all probability he drives her to ruin her own reputation by going elsewhere to have it fed.

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Betty pushed aside all the letters which were in sufficiently good handwritings as to proclaim themselves bills, and pounced upon one written in the niggly style of men who wish to be thought brainy.

It was from Valentine Worthing, and bore the Regent Street post-mark.

The sight of it sent a rush of blood to her cheeks. "Regent Street," she cried aloud, and kissed the post-mark ecstatically.

It only contained a few lines with a ragged margin. Betty had expected to find many pages full of baffled desire, beseechings, and anger.

She read :

"You dear thing: how hopelessly you misread me. But I know you for what you are. Don't I know myself? Aren't we precisely alike? We were playing exactly the same game. I only wished to work you up to a pitch of emotion when you could refuse me nothing—and then say to you, 'No, thanks!' And all you wanted was to do the same to me—and refuse in the same way. There is a most euphonious name for us which is not included in the dictionary. Perhaps you know it—Tibi.

"VALENTINE."

Betty Blundell's mouth took a hard, angry line, and she crushed the letter into a ball. Then her vanity pushed through her momentary humiliation,

and she smoothed out the paper and read it through again.

"How clever of him," she said, "to try and turn the tables like that. Any idiot could see plainly enough how successful I must have been."

And in this way also, Betty proved herself to be no different from ninety-nine women out of a hundred.

CHAPTER XI

CAME old Jesse Sloke into Ashley's sitting-room once more. His crinkled face, like nothing so much as a dried pippin, was pursed up with amazement. His master's breakfast had been placed, as it had been placed every morning upon the table. And it was untouched. Old Jesse had tottered up to Ashley's bedroom at a quarter to seven, thinking perhaps that he had not heard the call, and had found the bed unslept upon.

He looked at the clock for the twentieth time. It was some minutes after twelve. Such irregularity in the routine of the farm had never happened before. He had called his master at 4.30 in the summer, and 6.30 in the winter, every morning—every morning since the old master had been put under the Scotch fir in the little churchyard. Every morning the breakfast had been put upon the table at half-past seven in the summer and half-past eight in the winter. Every morning lunch had been ready at one, tea at five, and dinner at eight o'clock, and

every evening the house had been locked up and every light out by 9.30.

What was the meaning of this?

His annoyance gave way to anger. What right had the master to upset everything in this way? People got used to things. People—especially when they had crossed the meridian of their lives with one set of habits—couldn't do with sudden changes. The old man walked from the sitting-room into the hall and back again a hundred times, arguing in this way. Every time he re-entered the room his anger rose. It was too bad, he said to himself. *He* was up in time to call the master—why wasn't the master ready to be called? The breakfast had been got ready by his wife to the minute! Why wasn't the master ready for his breakfast? It was not fair! It was not just! If the master wished to begin being irregular, he should have been irregular years before. It wasn't giving him a chance. It would take him some time to shake himself out of his habits of regularity.

The sitting-room clock's thin voice struck one. The deeper, commoner, rougher voice of the kitchen clock hurried to announce the same hour.

Fright drove the old man's anger away. Something had happened to the master—the master he

had loved and served, but never understood. He couldn't have been struck by lightning—there had been no storm. He couldn't have been attacked by gipsies. He barely remembered to have seen gipsies in the neighbourhood.

Whistling, with a brave attempt at gaiety and unconcern, in order that his fright might not spread itself to his wife, the old man passed through the open front door of the farm-house, and went along the path to the white gate, eyeing the circular beds, filled with masses of flowers that were barely tamed, with eyes that took in nothing of their elementary colours. There, with eyes sharpened by fear, he gazed up and down the road. The dust lay thickly, whitely, movelessly. In the air myriads of golden specks danced lazily. The trees perspired under the midday sun, and the sheep lay under them panting, too hot to chew. Not a fleck of cloud broke the faint, endless blue of the sky. The birds were silent. Only the insects, drawn out of their lairs by the warmth, chattered and buzzed.

But nothing could be seen. Nothing disturbed the great, soft anthem of the day. Nothing moved on the road.

The old man shivered. Something had happened to the master. Only once before had he felt as he

now felt, and that was twenty-four years before, when, spending a night in the nearest market town selling sheep for the farm, he had awakened in the middle of the night at the inn, and remained awake, cold and trembling. And then he knew something had happened to his wife. And he had been right, for upon returning in the morning at full gallop, he found the new-born child dead, and his wife half-way through the cruel door that opens at a touch, and closes for ever against the strongest hand.

Involuntarily he raised his twisted fingers, and clasped them together in front of his eyes and called out :

“ Master, master ! ”

A distant thudding of heavy steps on turf took his hands trembling to his sides. With a spasm of joy and relief he saw the master coming towards the farm at top speed, running as a man runs who is chased, as a man runs who is afraid. He came nearer and nearer, at the end of his second breath, but fighting his way along, and at last swung through the gate, tore up the path and through the door, and flung himself, panting and dust-covered, into his chair.

The old man followed quickly. Putting his head into the sitting-room after a decent interval, he

found the master bent double, panting still, with his head between his hands. Ashley had run at top speed, with all his strength, but he had not been able to out-distance himself.

And again the old man was right. Something had happened to the master. A woman was in his blood for the first time in his life.

CHAPTER XII

YOUNG Ashley felt the old man's sympathetic, uneasy eyes upon him, and with an exclamation of rage which Jesse Sloke had never heard the master use before, he rose, waved him away, shut the door with violence, and locked it.

With a feeling of shame upon him, Ashley got himself by the throat, and tried to shake out of his eyes the face of the woman. He cursed himself for a fool, and repeated over and over again the words that his father had used.

He leaned on the mantel-board, and looked at the photograph of his father, mutely, in an agony of self-reproach. He gazed, with the deepest sympathy and love, into the stern eyes, the lined face, the sunken cheeks. He recalled all the tenderness, all the care, all the solicitude his father had daily shown him. The very tones of his voice rang in his ears. What a skunk he would be to think that he knew better than such a man! As he lifted the photograph to his lips, with a renewed

feeling of strength, the face of the woman, the delicately-cut sweet face, with its large blue eyes and exquisite colouring, came between.

For several hours, with feverish eagerness, Ashley did everything he could think of to regain mastery over himself. He took down his favourite books one after another, and read with a concentration that was almost painful. All went well for a few minutes. "She has gone," he said to himself. And that instant the face looked out at him from the pages. He put the books back into their places, and endeavoured to distract his attention by making a tour of the long, beamed, low-ceilinged room, looking at each familiar engraving and print as though he had never seen it before. There was not one in the room, big or little, out of which the face did not grow.

It was everywhere, no matter where he looked. It looked down upon him from the beams; it looked up at him from the worn carpet. He turned to the window and looked out at the trim lawn, the beds of flaming colours, the quaintly-cut hedges. Every diamond pane contained the face. At last, worn out, he flung himself, face downwards, upon the sofa, buried his eyes in the cushions and broke into the wild sobbings of a boy.

He had realised that he had been obliged to break his promise. He had realised that it was too difficult, too impossible. He had been living in a fool's paradise. Sooner or later it was bound to come—this *debâcle*, this great toppling on to his head of the edifice he had built so carefully round himself. His father had imposed too great a sacrifice upon him. He was a man like other men. He had read of love, of lust, impatiently. But love sent the blood spinning through his veins, and lust beat like a sledge-hammer at his temples.

CHAPTER XIII

UTTERLY unable to settle down to the work on the farm, young Ashley wandered about the house restlessly. His thoughts were chaotic. His whole mental outlook had undergone a tremendous change.

It seemed to him incredible, almost ludicrous, that so many years of his life should have been entirely devoted to the common round, the daily task, when the world contained such a creature as the woman he had seen upon the hill ; a creature so exquisite, so sweet, so wonderful ! Compared with her, how commonplace, how trivial seemed inanimate nature. The breaking of day, the setting of the sun, the bursting of the bud, the crash of thunder—what were they when compared with the lifting of a beautiful woman's eyelid, the touch of her hand, the soft murmur of her voice ?

All the man in him cried aloud for that woman. One sight of her had killed every desire to look at anything else. Nothing else mattered. In an

instant he had seen the emptiness, the incompleteness of his life. He wanted that woman. He wanted to lie at her feet and watch her mouth as she smiled. He wanted to feel her cool hand on his face, to taste her breath, to hold her tight in his arms, to kiss her hair and eyes and lips. The birds had their mates, the very flowers knew the joy of marriage. Was he to be the one man in the world to remain unsatisfied?

He asked himself these things as he paced the house. When he went into the sitting-room, however, he kept his eyes away from the direction of the fireplace. There was a look in the eyes of the photograph that he could not meet.

His dinner remained untouched. The son of his father's dead sheep-dog licked his hand, and received no affectionate word. Old Sloke got no response to his nervous "Good-night." The canaries in the cage in the window sat blinking at the lamp. No one had put the cover over the cage. The clock struck nine and ten and eleven, and still young Ashley paced the long room. Then suddenly he cried out, "Father, father!" and ran hatless into the night.

A thick bank of cloud obscured the moon. The air was humid and damp. Young Ashley left the footpath and plunged into a wood. The thin

branches, leaf-laden, lashed his face like whips, and the roots of trees caught his feet as though trying to stop him. As he flung the branches aside, he felt that he was freeing himself of some of the things that kept him tied to his promise, and he pushed on with an energy and a feverishness that sent streams of perspiration down his face.

At last he gained the open road, and started running. His steps rang and echoed through the sleeping village. Not a single light gleamed in the cottage windows. A cat darted aside, and stood with arched back in the shadow of the inn wall. A retriever gave an astonished bark as he went past the forge, and as he jumped over the low brick wall of the churchyard the clock struck twelve gravely, reprovingly.

John Ashley stopped at the grave of his father. It had been dug at the farthest corner of the churchyard, away from the graves of the people who had not left the world by a shorter cut than death takes them, but in consecrated ground, for the parson was a humble man, who cultivated some of the spirit of his Master, and paid little heed to the ignorant and pompous hypocrisy of his kind.

A plain, square stone marked the place where the man lay who died forgiving. The letters of his

name, "John Everard Campbell Ashley," were not yet blurred by the passing of time, and the sentence beneath them stood out clearly: "For I loved."

"Father," whispered young Ashley, "father!"

He paused for an instant and listened. The leaves of a weeping willow rustled softly.

Young Ashley bent lower over the stone.

"Father, all women are not like that—not all women. Even you forgave, and left me here to go to the one you loved. Father!"

He bent still lower, and flung his arm over the stone caressingly.

"You asked too much of me. I can't keep my promise. Let me off. I was happy until I understood what it meant to go without. Until yesterday I never had a wish to break my promise. But now you must let me off. You *must*. I love too—madly as you did—at once, and for ever. There's no fighting it. Wherever she goes I must go. Father!"

He listened again. His voice, when he spoke next, was no longer pleading; it was eager, hopeful, excited.

"Father, you should see her! She isn't the kind of woman to treat me as you were treated. She is different. She is like a flower—a sweet, slim flower. I thought when I came upon her that she was

growing where she stood. When I knew that she was a woman I ran away. Ah, ha! think of that. I can't live alone any longer. I know now that it isn't life alone. It is a—a mere pretence; not the real thing. Why shouldn't I be allowed to live? I say that she isn't a woman who isn't worthy of a man's whole love. She is too beautiful, too wonderful for that. I *must* be let off and take my chance. Father, don't stand in my way. Father, father!"

Young Ashley drew back and rested for a long, listening moment on his knees. Then with a little cry, half gladness, half excitement, queerly boyish, he leant over the stone and kissed the letters of the name.

Then he rose and flung back his head and squared his shoulders. The cloud passed away from the moon, and its light showed a face aglow, with shining eyes and a smile on the lips.

Walking quickly, young Ashley left the churchyard, made his way through the village and back through the copse. The branches and roots did their best more eagerly than ever to hold him back. But on went Ashley, young Ashley—and the way he considered the right way was the way he wanted to go.

(Ah, ah! young Ashley. So your father's experience, that was bought and paid for, is no use to you, eh? Oh, ho! young Ashley.)

On the hill where the little woman of the world has risen, young Ashley stopped and flung out his arms. A feeling of enormous relief passed over him. He was free! Free, and still friends with his father.

And he was in love for the first time in his life. He joyed in it. It was delicious. He would marry her, of course, and take her home to his farm, or go into the world with her. Where, it didn't matter, so long as *she* was at his side. God! what a day! Books were all very well once. Pictures were all very well in the old days. Nature, whose every mood he understood, was all very well so very long ago. But what were they as compared to flesh and blood, the beauty, the grace, the mystery of a woman?

"Dead things," he cried, "dead things. I want life!"

CHAPTER XIV

"I WENT out to my hill again this afternoon," wrote little Mrs. Blundell—"but my man wasn't there. The grass was still flat and sorry for itself where his great body had been; and having nothing better to do, I sat there to wait for him.

"I had plenty to think about. I had that morning received, among the batch you sent me from the flat, a most insolent, and yet a most ingenious letter from Valentine Worthing. I wonder why men who wish people to think they are clever always cultivate the same tiny writing, and sign their names so that they cannot possibly be made out? Valentine Worthing's handwriting is smaller and more slovenly than most. He said, in effect, that he had all along perfectly well understood the game I had been playing with him, and that he had been playing precisely the same game with me. Of course I don't believe this. It is so easy to guess the solution of a riddle after one has been told the answer. My suddenly going away gave him

the cue to my pastime. But I couldn't feel any annoyance with him. All I felt was that, after all, he was merely an ordinary, commonplace person, with the addition of a hideous deformity. What, I confess, did anger me were the letters from my tradespeople asking me for immediate settlement. What a peculiar race tradespeople are. Immediate settlement is the most ridiculous expression. Of course, naturally—like anyone else who is expected to do with the pittance of a naval officer's wife—I am hideously in debt. My dressmaker's bill makes my blood run cold. What Evelyn will say I can conceive only too well. That one of Friola's alone would, if settled as it stands, swamp a year's pay! And I have repeatedly assured him that I have done extremely well on the allowance he made me. I know what it means. It means that I shall have to devote all my time and all my best smiles to him to get him to write to his uncle for the money. He'll kick, anyhow. He calls it eating the pie of humiliation to borrow money. In the end the payment I shall make him for doing so will heal his wounded pride—but at what inconvenience to me!

“It was really a perfect afternoon. A faint breeze had got up and the air was cooler. It was so clear

that sitting on my hill I felt I could see for miles. I think I am getting almost to like this placid place. The feeling was an extraordinary one. I was so awfully alone. It was like waking to find oneself thrust back three or four hundred years, with nothing left of the life one knew but a memory. It seemed inconceivable, sitting there surrounded by trees and fields, fields and trees, and sky—sky—sky, that such things as streets and cabs and buildings and people existed anywhere. I sat for half an hour perfectly happy—can you believe it, knowing me? It's odd, but do you know, Milly, except for this peculiar, ever-present desire to pose and tease and tempt people of the opposite sex, I believe I should be quite a dear—an artist or a painter or a poet. Sometimes—not often—I am sorry that I am not, and I am almost inclined to think of my father and mother with dislike for having grafted in me this thing Valentine said that he understood. I suppose it *is* rather—well, unkind! I am certain it will land me in hot water sooner or later. I'll give it up some day, perhaps, and develop some other kind of taste—the ordinary one, perhaps, and go in for having children, and being normal and healthy. But not yet . . . not while my man of the woods remains unexplored.

Unconsciously he has flattered my vanity to such an extent that even if it meant losing everything—I mean Evelyn and respectability and all that—I am bound to go on. I am bound to try effects with this quaint, primeval giant. Fancy his running away like that!

“I shall never forget the look he gave me. It acted on my vanity like oil. I don't know how quite to describe it to you. I am sure there was fear in his eyes. And of course there was the wildest admiration. I am not sure there wasn't just a touch of reverence. And better still, there was desire. That's what I like to see. For then my fun begins, and I feed the fire like a stoker, add log upon log to the flame, till, just as it is about to flare up and burn me, I slip away. You don't understand the fascination of this, but then you are not beautiful, dear Milly. . . . Most beautiful women have tasted the delight, at one time or another, even if they don't use their power often. It *is* a power. No King, no Prime Minister, no General, no despot, no slave-owner can ever feel so utterly all-powerful as a beautiful woman who has a man cringing at her feet. I suppose I'm an awful fool to give myself away in black-and-white like this, even to such a dear old oyster as I know you to be. If ever you

were to quarrel with me, goodness, wouldn't you have the whip in your hand! But you won't. I know that. And, you see, I feel that I have to share my triumphs with someone. And writing letters to you is a far more satisfactory way of feeding my vanity than putting it down in a diary. I have the greatest contempt for women who keep diaries. They are such liars.

"Well, I waited on our hill in this ecstatic mood for two hours, and I believe I should have been there two hours longer but for a sudden clap of thunder, following a vivid flash of lightning. Without my noticing them, a great bank of clouds had been gathering behind me. I jumped up as the first spot of rain hit me—positively hit me—on the cheek. With it—what an odd thing the brain is!—came a sudden inspiration. Time was short, and as Mahomet wouldn't come to the mountain, the mountain would have to go to Mahomet. Do you see? I made up my mind to take advantage of the storm, make my way quickly to his farmhouse, run to the door with my best expression of timid fright, and beg for shelter.

"This I did, half regretting it when I found that I was bound to cover at least a mile and a half. My dear, it came down, literally, in buckets. Luckily I

had on one of my oldest frocks, for it was wringing wet in no time. Every time a flash came and the flame darted about among the trees, I wished I hadn't come. Every time I saw how my frock clung to me, I was glad I had. I was dead-beat when at last, a drowned rat, I reached the farm. I wasn't sure that it was *his* farm, but it was the only one about, so I ran up to the door and rang the bell. It was opened by an old man, with a prim, crinkled face, who looked as though he saw a ghost. I begged him to let me sit somewhere out of the storm, giving him a faint, sweet smile. Gasping with surprise and with a wistful attempt at politeness, he asked me to enter the master's room.

"My heart jumped. The blinds were down, the fire-irons and the glass were covered up with a cloth. I stood for a moment, looking round—such a lovely old room, beautifully furnished—and the old person murmured something about fetching his wife and ran off.

"The old woman came almost at once. A nice old body, quite flustered with excitement. 'Oh, poor lady,' she cried; 'such a beautiful dress too!' And then, talking all the time, she ran upstairs, and presently came down with a towel and a man's

dressing-gown and slippers. Shutting the door, talking nineteen to the dozen, she undid my frock, rubbed my hands and face, took off my hat and shoes and stockings, put on the dressing-gown—‘Mr. Ashley’s,’ she said—*his*, Milly dear!—and then ran to the kitchen with my wet things.

“Isn’t my luck astounding? Here was I, not only in *his own* room, but in his own room in such a helpful costume! Think of it from the purely artistic point of view. The dressing-gown—evidently one John Ashley wore in his early youth—showed my neck, and my ankles and feet,—my feet thrust into a pair of red list slippers of the most elephantine description. The rain had made my always curly hair all the more curly. I felt like Trilby in the studio, and I’m sure I looked infinitely sweeter than the one I saw.

“Suddenly I heard a deep voice; then two others excitedly joining in. The door opened and the old woman came in, followed by—oh, what luck is mine!—my untamed man of the woods, my primeval giant.”

CHAPTER XV

MRS. BLUNDELL put her pen down, threw back her head, and burst into a peal of laughter. The silver notes of it danced about the little room long after she started writing again.

“For some time he stood in the doorway, his handsome, unusual head almost touching the framework, blushing like a school-boy. I stood up, timid, shy, constrained, clutching the dressing-gown nervously about me, wordless, like an *ingénue* in a play. The old woman, with all the latent romance in her nature stirred, babbled the story of my arrival, while the old man got a word in here and there, whenever she was positively obliged to stop for breath. The situation was immensely amusing. What more picturesque introduction to him could I have possibly desired?

“‘I will go and make some tea for the young lady, sir,’ said the old woman at last. ‘Come,

Jesse, quick.' The door closed upon them, and we were alone.

"Have you ever experienced that horrible desire to laugh in church, or at a funeral, or in the midst of some quite serious scene at the theatre? The desire to laugh inordinately seized me, then. Luckily a sneeze came, and gave me relief, or I feel certain I should have fallen into the nearest chair and yelled!

"My dear Milly, his face was a picture. It was positively alight! His eyes danced and gleamed with pleasure and excitement. He looked at me as though he could have eaten me. But he made no attempt to speak. He simply stood behind a tall-backed chair (quite a good chair, excellently carved, and so old), leaning on the back of it, gazing at me.

"'I—I am so very sorry to put everybody to so much trouble,' I said, in that high-pitched, girlish voice which has always been one of my most valuable stock-in-trades. 'I don't think I ever remember such a violent storm. I am dreadfully nervous of lightning.'

"I paused and looked up at him. A smile passed over his face. It had the most extraordinary effect upon it. It looked as a field looks when a sudden

shaft of sun sweeps across it. But he said nothing. I don't think he was nervous or shy as we mean it ordinarily. He merely seemed infinitely delighted in a boyish kind of way. He made me feel as though I were a new horse, or the latest gun presented to him on his birthday. At first his continuous, wide-eyed stare made me quite uncomfortable, and I don't think he listened to a single word of my small-talk. He simply stood there, in an easy, unself-conscious attitude, his deeply-tanned hands clasped round the back of the chair, devouring me.

"I babbled on. I said how very kind he was to take me in, how very sorry I was to put his servants to any inconvenience, and what a lovely old house it seemed to be. Quite twenty minutes of this one-sided conversation went on—if a conversation can be called one-sided when one person replies silently through the medium of a pair of extremely expressive eyes, and says things which no one except a poet would have the pluck to say, unless he were engaged to be married.

"I confess I was a little relieved when the old couple brought in a tea-tray. I had begun to feel that I had exhausted every subject of a commonplace nature I had ever thought about.

"'Shall I pour out the tea ?' I asked, with a tiny, timid smile, when we were alone again.

"'Thank you,' he said.

"And all the time he stood in front of me watching me intently with an interest almost whimsical. It made the old occupation almost a new one, when I suddenly remembered that I was the first woman—gentlewoman—who had ever done 'so for him. He bowed as he took his cup, and instantly forgetting that he had got it in his hand, watched me as I stirred mine and sipped it.

"Having nothing more to say, and not feeling the need of making conversation, I contented myself with returning his smile when I caught his rapt eyes, and ate. The run, and the cooler air, had made me ravenous, and the cakes were home-made and perfectly delicious. And while I ate and drank I looked about me. Such a dear old room, Milly—just the sort of room one reads about in books, and so rarely comes across in real life. It was long and narrow—at least its length gave it the appearance of narrowness—and was lined, five feet from the old oak floor with bulging book-shelves, except where the great Dutch fireplace stood. And above the books, right up to the ceiling, hung pictures—pictures of all kinds and sizes—paintings, etchings, prints

engravings, all good and old, and in the best taste. I could see Carlyle in the shelves, and Shakespeare, Dickens, George Eliot, Thackeray, Swift, Addison, Gibbon, Milton, Byron, Keats, Goldsmith, and Heaven knows who besides. At any rate, all the people one calls dry. There were, so far as I could see, no modern books, no novels. And they all looked in that worn condition, that comfortable, bulgy state into which books get that are frequently in hand. They didn't stare out at one in the stiff, proud, pained way as they do out of the shelves of those people who put them there, calf-bound, for show. They beamed at me, in a jovial, friendly manner, like so many elderly uncles with rosy cheeks and white hair, and portly stomachs. Dear old things, I loved them. And as for the pictures, they clung to the walls as though they had grown upon them, and never wished to leave go. Here a big one, there a little one—anyhow, all higgledy-piggledy, and yet exactly as they ought to be.

“At the far end of the room, a long, low window, diamond-paned, with shutters of black oak, threw the light over a deep window-seat covered with a rose-bud chintz, very worn and dimmed, upon the polished oak floor. And through this I could catch a glimpse of antediluvian Scotch firs standing in

their peculiar, silent, dignified manner here and there upon a lawn. Behind them, and in front of a stained but steady red wall, were beds choking with masses of cloves and pinks, and Sweet Williams and London Pride, and all those country-cousin flowers that have become the fashion again with us. And over the wall the tops of many dusky red barns and out-houses peeped, in quite a curious way.

"The whole place fitted my giant like a glove. It was all, like him, so good to look at, so simple, so upright, so clean, picturesque, and unconscious. It all, like him, seemed to be utterly behind the times, utterly unknowing, utterly unspoilt. And as he stood there, tanned a brick-dust colour, with his eyes clear and steady and child-like, his eyebrows and hair burnt copper, his back broad and straight, his long, well-set legs firm and strong, upon my honour, he seemed to be related to the Scotch firs, the very child of the old wonderful books, the dark, beautiful prints.

"It wouldn't have surprised me in the least if, at night, when he sat at the little flap-table at his dinner, shining with health and fresh air, with the light of the cranky lamp throwing his strong features upon the wall, these old books popped out of the shelves and stood round him, with their glasses on

their noses, and talked, while he said 'Yes, sir,' and 'No, sir,' and 'Indeed, sir!' in his deep, vibrating voice.

"When I looked at him, after all these things had flashed through my head, there he was still standing in front of me, untouched cup in hand, watching.

"Any other man would have been boorish, impossible. But oddly enough, I looked for nothing else in my giant.

"Nothing that he could have said, of course, could have fed my vanity half so satisfactorily as this long, silent, meaning stare. Every second the expression in his eyes changed. Wonder came, love came—that new-born wonderful love—the first love—passion came. But not, I must own, till in an experimentary way I slipped my foot out of its red felt barge, and pushed it out from under the dressing-gown. Then he clutched the chair tight, and turned his eyes away, with quick breath coming and going, and when he looked again my foot was out of sight.

"Oh, Milly, what a power it is! Beast or not, I know nothing in this world that gives me so keen, so delirious a pleasure as the exercise of it. I feel almost magical. It gives me the faculty of turning a man into a hungry animal—even such a man as

this one, who is ashamed and fearful, and who, for choice, would forget everything except just that I am beautiful and dainty and ethereal.

"But I had broken the spell. He put down his cup and awoke. His smile became self-conscious and nervous. He fidgeted shyly, began sentences and left them unfinished. Luckily, the old woman came in and said my dress was dry, and the storm had passed some time. There would be no more lightning. And so, with a smile as nervous as his own, and every bit as shy, I hurried after the old body out of the room and upstairs to hers.

"It cost me half a sovereign. I would gladly have paid fifty times that amount for the afternoon.

"I dressed quietly, listening to the garrulous chatter of the well-meaning dame—my frock was utterly ruined—and then followed her down to the hall.

"‘Good-bye, Mr. Ashley,’ I said, giving him my hand timidly. ‘Thank you so much!’”

CHAPTER XVI

"HE took my hand for an instant, and then letting it go said, stammering, 'May I . . . may I . . .'

"'Oh, that's very kind of you. Indeed I shall be delighted. I think the storm has made me nervous.'

"On the face of the old woman as she watched us go out together there was a peculiar smile in which I could read a reawakened romance, an almost pathetic hope. But the old man scowled at me. I was a new invention, and therefore—he was thoroughly English—a danger. I had the satisfaction of knowing that I was the first unvillage woman—I hate the word lady, it reeks of tram-cars and clearance sales and suburban tea-fights—who had ever been seen with 'the master.'

"The white dust of the morning had become mud. Pools had formed along the edges of the road. A kind of steam rose from the earth, and the heads of the corn, which before had been straining to catch whatever moisture the air contained, were

bending down looking gratefully at the soft earth at their feet. It was a couple of hours before sunset, and the sun, even then quite warm, fell softly upon everything. The delicious air was alive. Thousands—tens of thousands of gnats moved in thick battalions above our heads, and to the right and left the air was filled with the cheerful, refreshed voices of birds.

“The freshness of everything was contagious. We both walked on springs. For no reason at all we both laughed. A bird which, after struggling wildly and tugging with all its might at a worm in a corn-field, let go and darted annoyedly away at our approach, brought it to our lips. Our own shadows, his so long, mine so short, cast on the road in front of us, set us off. We were like two school-children let loose after school. I believe if I had started running helter-skelter along the road he would have chased me.

“All his shyness faded. With the pride of the proprietor he pointed out to me the excellence of the crops, laughingly explaining the difference between corn and barley, barley and oats. He never referred to his first meeting me on the hill, but he referred to the hill, and told me—no doubt thinking what a diplomatic touch it was—that he

always spent a certain amount of time there every day in the summer, reading.

“‘To-morrow,’ he added, ‘I shall be there in the afternoon.’

“The sun had begun to set when I got back to the cottage. My dear, we had taken two hours to walk two miles. This time *he* had done all the talking, and if I needed any convincing on the subject, he had convinced me as to his being the most interesting person on whom to exercise my peculiar gifts of any I had ever met. He had proved what a boy he was, and what a man he was, how immense was his knowledge of Nature, and how infinitesimal of human nature—what an artist he was, and what a Goth. Oh, my dear, I feel that I am going to have some of the most enjoyable days I shall ever have in my life.”

CHAPTER XVII

A SMILE was still playing round his mouth as Ashley swung into the road. He had removed his cap to Mrs. Blundell with the air of a Quixote. He had not forgotten to put it back. He kept his head bare to the soft breeze as a tribute to her as he made his way unconsciously to the hill where he had seen her first.

He stood there erect and firm as the sun slipped away.

A thousand voices sang to him. It was a new song, a song he had never heard before. It stirred and soothed and excited him. It made him smile and tremble. It filled him with fear and joy. Love had thrust her golden key into his long-closed heart, turned it in the rusty lock, and flung the door wide open.

He understood everything. He had not been living hitherto. He had thought that it was right that life should get everything out of him that was in him to devote to it. Now he knew that he

should get everything out of life that there was in it to devote to him. The whole aspect of things was suddenly changed. It was as though someone had suddenly planted him on his feet after he had been standing all his life on his head.

He was amazed to think that he could have spent all his years in such a position. Everything, for the first time, looked right. The sun became his servant instead of his master, the earth his very good friend, instead of a tyrant at whose very change of mood he shuddered. Everything that had seemed great became tiny, minute, a matter of slight consequence. What did it matter now if frost spoilt his early roots, rain his crops? Nothing. Nothing mattered! Nothing of importance existed in the world except love. Not the kind of love he had given to his father. Not the love he had since poured out upon his books. Nor the love he felt for Nature. Those were mild, gentle kinds of love more suited to women. He had suddenly become awake. The only love that mattered to him was the love that was alive. The only thing worth living for was just to hold *her*—the woman—tight against his heart, to feel her breath upon his lips, the rise and fall of her bosom against his chest, the scent of her hair in his brain, to watch her as she moved, to touch her, to

kiss her, to fall asleep in her arms, languid, placid, content.

For hours he stood there, looking out, but seeing nothing, a rush of new thoughts tumbling over one another in his brain.

The sun touched his face with his rosy hand and went down. The moon slipped into her place, and smiled faintly upon him. The stars, like a bevy of children when the school doors swing back, rushed into the open, in great clusters; a big one, admonishing, amidst groups of youngsters almost too young to walk alone. One by one the lights went out in the village beneath. The occasional faint shout ceased. Only the clock in the tower of the church remained awake. With relentless punctuality, though always with a suggestion of solemnity, her mellow voice sang the death and birth of the hours.

CHAPTER XVIII

"ANOTHER day gone of the few that are left to me, Milly. The rapidity with which they slip through my fingers is positively illegal. What wouldn't I give to be able to inform some authority or other of their excessive speed, and get them to post policemen on the road to see that they go at a quarter the pace.

"It's always the way when one is really putting in a good time. I remember how the Christmas holidays used to melt and dwindle in the palm of my hand. Looking back at them from this distance—and the milestones increase every day, the beastly things!—they seem to have been pretty poor fun. The force of contrast, I suppose. Then I thought the dresses cut just below the knee, run up hastily by a cheap woman, from material mother used to get at sales, were perfect. How I used to prance in those days, when I went to a dance in some feeble piece of mother's jewellery in which there was even a suggestion of a diamond. Insidious things! They

are accountable for more sheer immorality in this world than either curiosity, vanity, or innocence. I suppose there are very few women—decently bred, I mean—who will not consent to anything, however dangerous, when an exquisite diamond is held in front of her nose. Mother once consented to let me wear the ring poor old father gave her when they were engaged. He had just got his company in those days, and thought he was passing rich on his £240 a year. Mother kept the ring in its box at the back of her wardrobe, among his love-letters, and only wore it on state occasions. She thought it contained the three finest diamonds in the world. Funny, isn't it? I suppose I am one of those women who are born with the sense—but directly I had it on I knew that they were paste. It quite took the vim out of that dance. I felt limp and spiritless. The only thing that saved it from utter failure was a wild flirtation with the host, a bald-headed, beady-eyed man of thirty-eight. I was fifteen. He tried to kiss me. I boxed his ears so hard that my hand ached. I shall never forget the expression on his face. He stood looking at me for about three minutes quite silent. Then he said suddenly: 'Have you read Kipling?' 'Yes,' I answered, wondering what

on earth he meant; 'everything of his I could get hold of.' 'Ah,' he replied, 'one of these days, inevitably, when your beauty gets stale, you will be following what he aptly terms "the oldest profession in the world."'

"What a beast that man was! I hadn't the faintest idea what he meant then. I believe I took it as a subtle compliment; but when, after the holidays, I asked one of the governesses the meaning of it, I simply laughed. Being a soldier, he was no psychologist, naturally, and if ever a man made a mistake in his life that man is he. It's quite the last thing in the world I should take to. In my opinion, there are only two reasons why women adopt that profession—discontent or starvation. I'm not a bit sorry for the former—it shows such a lack of imagination—but for the latter I have nothing but deep sympathy. Poor poor things! I think, I really think, that if that or starvation stared me in the face, I should choose starvation.

"We English women, unlike the women of France and Spain, have no enterprise. We are too honest. I suppose that's the word. We feel bound, conscientiously—I think, ridiculously—to make some return for value received. Never was there such a fatal mistake. I am, and you can go and tell me.

nothing, is my motto. Goodness! if that were taught in schools, instead of the sentimentally false doctrine which is imbued in the minds of young girls, there would be no need for asylums for nameless children, no baby-farming scandals, no piteous cases in the police courts of child desertion, no 'gentlemen' who are not required to give their names when they are summoned for alimony. It is sentimentality that is the ruin of so many women—sentimentality and the utter lack of knowledge of man. We think, most of us—silly people, that the only way to keep our lovers and our husbands under our roof is to give them all they want. My dear, as you of course know, it is the very best and most effective plan for driving them away. Men are such easy creatures to fathom. Give them a thing, they take it, and turn away. Don't give it to them, and they remain kneeling at your feet till the end of time. In the intervals of kneeling they will go elsewhere, naturally; but your roof will be their roof, you the one person the world contains for them. I believe that if every girl were taught just tact, diplomacy, self-respect, and a knowledge of man, women would govern and teach the world, and the world would be better for it. As it is, that old, foolish, disastrous, untrue religious doctrine is taught,

'You mustn't tamper with the ways of Nature,' with the result we all know too late. Tamper with the ways of Nature! Bosh! Don't we punish people for stealing and forging, and murdering and smashing and assaulting? And aren't they merely obeying the dictates of Nature? It is Nature to be uncivilised. Civilisation has come along and made all these things criminal. Why has that *one* thing been left outside the reach of legislation? Shall I tell you? It's amusing and instructive, and has made people laugh many times. Just because, my dear Milly, the people who made our laws were male. But we are on the right road. Soon—not too soon—when Parliament gets into it a few men who are not crushed down by the spirit of 'good form' which weighs so heavily on everything English, this matter will be dealt with as drunkards have been dealt with, and men will be punished by being taxed for every superfluous child they bring lawfully into the world, and sentenced to a term of imprisonment for every child they bring unlawfully into the world.

"What a marked improvement there will then be in our literature, art, music, and every kind of work that depends on the individual brain of men. They will create then, instead of imitating as they do now.

"Ah, well, of course you've heard all this before.

We women have said these things since 'afternoons' became an institution, and to tell you the truth, even were these protecting laws to be made, we should, I think, most of us, break them straight away. They may make laws for ever, but they will never get curiosity and sentimentality out of our veins."

CHAPTER XIX

"I WENT to the hill—nowadays everything interesting happens on a hill—like a very girl. The sun was deliciously warm after yesterday's storm, and all the leaves, grasses, trees, and hedges smelt sweet. One felt that the wife of the clerk of the weather had made an inspection, found an accumulation of dust and cobwebs about, and had ordered her servants to turn the place out. The operation was inconvenient; the result refreshing.

"I danced out of the cottage in the best of tempers with the world and myself. I had every reason to be. I found that a frock I had intended to throw away came out looking pretty nearly new. It's a white muslin, with insertions of lace run through with Cambridge blue baby-ribbon. The sort of thing they always put the young girl of the play into. Whoever she may be, whether a monied amateur, or a young person from the provinces, she always looks well in it, however badly she may act. And how badly these people play as a rule. Is it because they

are never allowed to do what a young girl off the stage would do under similar circumstances, but are made to go through all the impossible tricks the stage manager has stored up in his head from the dark ages? Personally, I know no girl, and never have known one, who titters on to the stage with very tiny steps, giggles when she gets there, kneels at someone's feet, crying: 'Oh, *do* let me do this,' that, or the other, cries a little for no apparant reason, smiles through her tears, and then titters off again with very tiny steps. And yet on the stage she is the recognised young person, and must always behave in the same way. I'm a tremendous playgoer, as you know, and it seems to me that the reason five out of every six plays are failures is simply owing to the fact that the parts are given to people because they have played similar parts before. For this reason, however original the play really is, it always seems to be one we have seen, it never seems to be new. This great cry for personality which one hears everywhere is the ruin of plays. After all, what is personality, so far as actors and actresses are concerned? It merely consists in their having a good set of teeth, or bandy legs, or indistinct enunciation, or a moustache and an eyeglass, or a bull neck or a lisp, or calves in front of the leg.

That's all. And so, if a girl is playing a sad part, it doesn't matter. She has been engaged for her teeth, and so she smiles. If a man is playing Hamlet, he must make no attempt to put on false calves or to hide a horrid lisp. Indeed, I really believe, that if a man is told by the critics when he begins—they never tell a man the truth when he has arrived—of some glaring and atrocious fault, he seizes upon it, exaggerates it, nurses it, works it into every part until, in quite a short time, it is no longer called a fault but a personality. I know a man slightly who writes plays who positively dreads them getting into the hands of actors and actresses. He says they can't pronounce his words, and never by any chance understand the meaning of their lines. He is, I believe, the most successful playwright of the day, and so his word is law, and all he insists upon their doing is merely committing his lines to memory, and imitating his every gesture and intonation.

"Why is it, I wonder, that actors and actresses—at least some of them—are such hopelessly unimaginative, uncreative, unintellectual people? I know—at least I have met—quite a number of them here and there. They *are* so funny. If one gives them the least encouragement they call one pet names, or 'dear.' And if one asks them to lunch they bring little bags

with changes of clothes, and call each other 'darling' and 'dearest' across the table. Their conversation never wanders from the stage, and after they have called all the prominent and successful people 'fine,' 'grand,' and 'superb,' they set about pulling them to infinitesimal shreds, and wind up by saying that of course they have mistaken their vocation. So-and-So, who is generally supposed to be the only Hamlet of the day, ought to have stuck to painting, they say. So - and - So — undoubtedly a beautiful *comédienne* — would have done better to have remained a general servant; and So-and-So—who is recognised as the best emotional actor of all time—would have been wise to have been content with 'bus - conducting. They talk about 'art' as though it were somebody's chocolate, or a hair-restorer, and by 'art' they mean acting. Of course acting isn't an art. It is merely the habit of being able to repeat lines with correct emphasis without appearing to act. It is, in short, mere mimicry, and most actors completely ruin the characters they are given to represent by acting.

"However, all this has nothing to do with my hill or my monster. When I arrived, the latter was on the former, as they say in newspapers. He was standing up with his hands in his pockets, smiling.

For a moment I hardly recognised him. He looked like the younger brother of the John Ashley I had met the day before. All the lines had gone out of his face, all the sternness, the aloofness, the underlying discontent. He was a great boy.

“‘So glad you’ve come,’ he said, turning to me eagerly. ‘I began to think you had been carried into the air on the breeze, and borne away like a petal! Will you sit here, or here with your back to the tree? . . . No, don’t sit with your back to the tree, the moss will stain your dress.’

“I sat down on the smooth, spongy turf, and gave one of my best girlish laughs.

“‘You can’t have been waiting long,’ I said.

“‘Long?’ he cried, flinging himself at my feet. ‘Don’t you call a thousand million years long?’

“He laughed as he said it, but I had a feeling that a thousand million years couldn’t have worked a greater change in his face and his manner than twelve hours had done.

“With his elbows in the grass and his chin in the palms of his brown hands, he lay, looking up at me with his eyes full of a dancing light. This afternoon, unlike yesterday afternoon, it was he who did all the talking. I hardly said a word for an hour.

“He babbled about every conceivable thing under

heaven, except the things of the moment. It was all perfectly charming. Sometimes humorous, sometimes fanciful, always whimsical, because so utterly, almost impossibly unworldly. From the few questions I put to him, I could see that he was quite outside the movement of things. He didn't even know whether the Liberals or the Tories were in power, and cared less. It was like the song of a thrush, whose little life had been spent within a whistle of its nest. And all the time his eyes were fixed on me with a look of such boyish adoration that instinctively, unconsciously, I slipped off my wedding-ring and put it in my pocket.

"I could see that my methods with him would have to be most guarded and careful; that anything that wasn't extremely subtle and cunning would tend to jar upon him. Like all men who make the acquaintance of the little god late in life, he idealised. I wasn't a woman: I was an angel. I didn't stand on the rude earth by his side. I sat upon a cloud all carved and picked out with gems.

"It was all very new, very fascinating. I had had no experience quite like it. All the boys I had met in my earliest youth were boys who were cramming for the Army. And you know the kind of boys they are—editions *des lures* of worldliness,

first states of knowledge. I really wished as I sat listening to him, watching the enthusiasms pass over his face like waves, that I could have begun all over again from the beginning, and been something like the kind of thing he had elevated me into.

“For three wonderful hours I was actually alone with this boy-monster, this baby-giant, behaving as any simple little girl would have done. For three solid hours I was alone with an untried man, without experimenting upon him in the way that gives me such sheer delight. I made up my mind to try and refrain from my usual practices; to abstain, to be just a sweet, laughing, happy little maiden. I made up my mind to leave him with the remembrance of merely clean love in his eyes, the delicious, wholesome love with which they were filled. But that imp inside me willed otherwise. Heavens! how deep-rooted one's habits become. . . . I saw him glance quickly at me. I saw the blood flood his face. I saw a gleam come into his eyes.

“I gained my momentary triumph. But I was sorry immediately. In his case, it seemed *such* a pity.”

CHAPTER XX

THE same evening, before dinner, a serious consultation took place in the kitchen of Ashley's farm, a consultation that almost ended in a quarrel.

Since the sudden visit of the strange lady during the storm, old Sloke had passed his time shaking his head gravely, and sitting about in the kitchen with his hands spread out on his knees, saying frequently to his wife :

"Sarey, Sarey, what's afoot ; Sarey, what's afoot ?"

His wife, whose romantic nature, so long unsatisfied, had been powerfully stirred by the sight of Betty Blundell, and who had dreamed every night for several nights of orange blossoms and wedding bells, and the crowing of a baby, made small of the old man's ill-omened grumbling, and laughed softly to herself, and hummed snatches of a cheerful hymn as she went about her housework. Nevertheless the behaviour of the young master weighed heavily upon the old man's mind. His

sight was failing him, and he needed powerful glasses to enable him to read. But even his eyes were strong enough to see the new light in his master's, even his eyes told him that young Ashley's whole nature had been thrown into a condition of ecstatic chaos.

Old Sloke did not wonder at it.

'Her be a rare pretty bit, and so her be," he said, "as would putt ony man into a muck o' sweat, that there be sartin'. But what Oi would kindly like fur ter know are who be her, an' wheer be her coom from, an' what be her a-wantin' heer?"

"My good feller, an' how should I know?" replied Sarah Sloke, in a tone and with a nod of the head which conveyed the fact that she knew very well.

The old man read her meaning well enough, and his head shook sagely from side to side, and he grumbled as he puffed his pipe. He found it difficult to grumble and smoke at the same time owing to the fact that he was obliged to hold the stem of his pipe between his gums, his only remaining teeth being at the back on both sides of his jaw. This, and his wife's mysteriously jocular manner, drove him to think out some plan of immediate action. An inspiration came to him

just as he was about to settle down to forty winks after luncheon, in his chair under the apple tree.

"Ah!" he said to himself, as he rose and shuffled to the gate, setting his curious old cap at the correct village angle; "Oi remember. Oop, guards, an' at 'em!"

With an uneasy glance towards the house to make sure that his wife was not watching, Sloke started out for the village. The afternoon sun blazed down upon the dusty road with a persistence and strength which made it a matter of surprise to the burnt, brown turf that it did not burst into flame.

Gathering impetus as he became less stiff, the old man hurried up the white road that he had covered so often and knew so well, taking no notice of the farm fields to the right and left. As he went he kept up a mumbling monologue, often shaking his twisted forefinger, often half stumbling over a loose stone. He sat down for a moment or two on the top of the hill to get his breath and mop his forehead with the back of his hand. Then, with a dogged pluck that almost made him break into a jog-trot, old Sloke started off again. Once in the village, he headed straight to the cottage of Mrs. Weeks, acknowledging

hastily the cheery salutations of Bob Berridge, who stood on the well-whitened step of the parlour of the "Angler."

He did pull up for a moment at the gate of a lonely cottage covered with a creeper that hung thickly over its narrow windows and formed a screen over the door. It was here that the daughter of one of the farm hands; long since dead and buried, lived—a once pretty, fair-haired young woman who had left the village eleven years before to go into service at the Doctor's house in the town, and who had returned to find herself alone except for a child soon to be born into a world that turned its head away. It was in this cottage that the old master had placed her, paying her, as the young master still continued to do, the few shillings a week sufficient to keep her body and bitter soul together, and bring up the little girl with the golden hair and blue eyes, with whom no other children were permitted to play.

Old Sloke caught sight of the lonely little girl sitting in the porch, in a blue pinafore, with a white bow tied round a strand of her hair, nursing a kitten.

"'Ow be mother to-day, dearie?" asked old Sloke.

The little girl ran eagerly to the gate and put

one of her hands upon one of the old man's affectionately.

"Not so well to-day, Mr. Sloke," she said, with a tremble in her voice.

"Ah," said he; "Oi be fair sorry fur ter 'ear that, dearie. Mabbe her'll be better ter-morrer Oi'll get t' wold 'ooman ter send along some beef-tea and eggs."

"Thank you, Mr. Sloke. May I come to the farm and fetch them, please?"

"No, dearie; better not coom. Master John doan't like strangers coomin' ter farm."

'But I'm not a stranger, Mr. Sloke. Last time I saw Mr. John he tilted my straw hat over my nose and said 'Hullo, Baby!' It was three years ago."

"Better not, dearie. I'll be fur sendin' 'em down along of the cart."

He touched the disappointed child's brown cheek with his finger, twisted his face into a kind smile, and passed up the road. It always gave him a certain sense of importance to feel that the farm, and consequently he himself, looked after these people who were shunned by the rest of the village. It also gave him a feeling of pain when he saw the rapidly-growing, little superfluous girl,

with her exquisitely oval face, wide, frank eyes, and hair like ripened corn, and thought of how much his wife would have given to call her daughter. As it was, her father, the Doctor's son, who had been everything by turn and nothing long, and was now a jovial member of the Bechuanaland Police Force, who played the banjo and sang love-ballads like an angel, did not even know of her existence. He could not have put more expression into his songs if he had known, and so, as that is the only effect such knowledge would have had upon him, perhaps it was as well. This is the way with sentimentalists with no sense of responsibility and a huge dislike for suffering. They are splendid fathers, though extremely unfaithful husbands, and always have someone to put flowers upon their graves.

Arrived at the cottage of Annie Weeks, old Sloke pulled himself together and walked with great dignity and solemnity up the narrow path, bordered with sweet-peas now rapidly running to pod, to the open front door.

Mrs. Weeks, with her brawny, energetic arms bare, as usual, was ironing some washing on the kitchen-table.

"H'Uncle," she cried, with genuine pleasure. "This *his* a surprise."

Old Sloke took up a position in front of the busy, cheerful woman, and put the tips of all his fingers on the kitchen-table.

"Niece," he said, "Oi be just coom down fur to ask you who are that theer young 'ooman?"

"Young woman! What young woman?"

The old man tapped the table with his fingers.

"That theer young 'ooman," he replied, "that be lodgin' along o' you nobody knaws fur why."

Mrs. Weeks put her hot iron on its stand with a bang and folded her arms.

"Young woman!" she said shrilly. "I'd 'ave you to know, uncle, as 'ow that young woman ain't a young woman. For the matter of that she ain't a woman at all; no, nor hever 'as been. She's a lidy, an' you may take it from me, an' sorry I am as 'ow one of mine, as you are, in a manner o' speakin', although reely you are not, strictly and as one would say in a court of law, if one 'ad the misfortunacy to be there, bein' only Alf's uncle by blood, and proud 'e is of it, and so am I, but not when you misname folks as walks in another and 'igher spear, as does you and yours no manner o' 'arm, and is never likely to do the same."

Old Sloke remained unmoved by the woman's eloquent outburst. He looked straight at her

with an added solemnity, and continued to drum on the table with his fingers.

'Annie Weeks,' he said, "Oi arst you onest, and Oi arst you twiyst, who be that theer young 'ooman as lodges in this heer cottage?"

"An' *I've* said onest, and I'll repeat it eighty times eighty, as 'ow the young woman as lodges 'ere ain't a woman, and I won't 'ave her called so; no, not even by an elderly man who I 'ave a duty to, an' am like to 'ave, knowin' 'ow to conduct myself in the way I should go, an' tryin' to do those things wot I ought to do, the same as hevery sinful body would, bein' human an' frail, an' if I fall, to pick myself up again and turn the other cheek, an' so I repeats to you, uncle, meanin' no offence, but riskin' it, as 'ow the individual in question is a lidy, born, bred, and unmistakable."

She stopped because her breath ran short, and stood facing the old man with heaving bosom.

"Oi doan't say as 'ow her bean't a lidy," said Sloke. "Wot Oi do say are, lidy or no lidy, her be a female, an' as such, wot be her a-doin' 'angin' round after Master John?"

Mrs. Weeks laughed scornfully.

"'Angin' round after Master John? Well, if that ain't the best titbit as I've 'eard this long time, with

'im fair blown about 'er, an' ready an' willin' for to devour the ground she puts her feet on, stones an' all, so that it's the talk of the place from the 'Settin' Sun' to the 'Cow and Calves,' and back by the 'Old Cock'—yes, and makes no bones about it 'e don't, passin' 'ere all times of day, an' 'e never was knowed to afore, bein' seen sittin' lover-like at her knees a-top of the 'ill for stretches at a time, yearnin' unmistakable, so that it were easy for Bessy Pounds' boy, as keeps a heye on Mr. Petty's sheep, to see 'arf a mile off, and 'im too young to know nothin' o' the sweets and dangers of such like intercourse, an' then takin' up a position in front o' the winders at all times o' night, and me as nervous as a thrush with eggs that the blind were undrawn or a lamp atween my lidy and the blind, same as I've seen certain things at the fair on a screen in the big tent, which it is tuppence to see, an' worth threepence any day as a heye-opener, but not for the young, an' the way they're allowed in those places these times fairly shows up the school guardians—"

Old Sloke took the opportunity of the woman's inability to continue to put in a word. His expression had changed from solemnity to one of consternation.

"Woa!" he cried, "woa! Oi'll be just fur goin'

over that there bit agin. Sittin' at 'er knees a-top o' the 'ill?"

"Yes; ever since the storm."

"Takin' oop a position in front o' these heer winders all times o' night?"

"Yes; a-sighin' like a man with the indigestyitis."

There was a long pause.

Mrs. Weeks, feeling that she had displayed all her surprises with a great eye for dramatic effect, stood back and watched the old man with an air of natural triumph.

The old man, who had become possessed of the knowledge of a state of things that even he had never conceived possible, withdrew his fingers from the table, rubbed his forehead, and breathed noisily.

"Well," he gasped at last—"well, Oi be dagged!"

And then came Mrs. Weeks's chance. She leaned forward with the flush of common-sense on her hot face, and improved the occasion as only an honest woman can.

"An' glad I am," she said heartily, "as it 'as come to this at last with Master John, being as 'e is a fine big feller at the flower of his man'ood, without a known defec', sound in wind and limb, fer I don't 'old with the new-fangled notions of hold Mr. Hashley, not, as I says often, as he were hold as

hage is calkilated in the Book, not by a good ten to fifteen year, time to repent and more, and make a decent will, of astin' a man to go through life without the 'and of a wife to soothe and keep quiet and do 'er duty by him at proper intervals of time without a grumble, but proud to fill 'is 'ouse with young feet and rosy cheeks to be a prop in old age and a comfort in declinin' years, as I 'ave said frequent when talkin' over poor young Master John in bed along of Alf when 'e would as lief 'ave turned an' slep, wore out with honest labour—ah, an' wished there were someone as would say these things to Master John afore it were too late, and put 'im in the way of meetin' a nice, 'ealthy young person in a good position to do it for 'im, there bein' a church 'andy with a parson ever ready for wedding and burial fees, and no wonder, with a livin' that ain't nothin' o' the kind, but a bread and scrape, and I do 'ope as 'ow Master John'll have all the luck as I could wish 'im with the lidy as is a young widder, accordin' to what I've guessed, and that you and haunt will yet live to nurse three or four fine hinfants hup at Hashley's farm, and that I say, meanin' hevery word, knowin' the truth of the same."

The old man listened attentive to his deady-earnest niece, and slowly put on his cap.

"You be a fair good 'ooman, Annie Weeks," he said, in a voice that was not quite steady, "as talks sense and acts up to it. Oi should 'ave nothin' ter say agin' it—no, never a word, but that Oi knaws summat as no one knaws in all this land beside Master John, being told by t' wold master three days afore 'e left us, and this is enough ter make him turn in 'is grave under that theer stone. Beyond that there, Oi 'ave nothin' more ter say."

With a quiet and pathetic dignity that silenced the garrulous and curious Mrs. Weeks, the old man turned on his heel and walked out of the cottage.

There was no haste in his walk as he made his way back to the farm. He went slowly, with his head bent forward. He passed the cottage with its heavy creeper without noticing that the little girl stood at the gate longing wistfully for a word, and he passed the "Angler" without hearing Mr. Berridge's cordial invitation to taste the bitter ale. On he went in the blazing sun through the white dust, thinking sadly of the old master's eager hope that his son might never fall in love with a woman with white hands and silk dresses as he himself had done to his cost.

When he reached the milestone on the top of the hill, he stopped feebly for a moment and looked down

at the farm-house nestling in the hollow between the trees and then across the rolling fields, in the pink of health and cultivation, in the direction of the little churchyard, and then, with a sudden straightening of his back, towards the hill of which Mrs. Weeks had spoken, which was a continuation of the one upon which he stood.

"Mabbe," he said aloud, "'twas all wumman's gossip. Oi'll go over and see, dagged if I won't!"

With an amazing return of energy, born of hope, he turned abruptly and left the road and got nimbly over the stile. He was about to cross the field in which Ashley's fly-tortured cows were trying to find something succulent in the brown, parched grass, when he caught the glint of a blue sun-bonnet through a gap in the hedge. Underneath it was the wistful, oval face of the little superfluous girl.

"Be that you, dearie?" he sang out, struck with a new and curious thought.

"Yes, Mr. Sloke. Do you want me?"

"Aye, dearie. Joomp over t' stile and coom along o' me for a little wark."

In a twinkling the child ran to the stile, mounted it, bounded through the grass and caught up the hand of her old friend.

"I followed you," she said, "because I didn't think you was well."

"Oh, Oi'm all right, dearie; but Oi'm fair glad you coom."

"Where shall we go, Mr. Sloke? To the farm?"

"Mabbe we will. Arter all, thinks Oi, you might as well take whome them there dainties for your poor mother."

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Sloke," cried the little girl, dancing along at the old man's side. "Which way shall we go?"

"Over Hog's back, dearie. It'll be cooler under the trees."

While the child babbled and skipped, the old man hurried forward determined to find out for himself how much of truth there was in the story he had heard from Mrs. Weeks. He knew of young Ashley's practice of spending an hour on the hill with his books at that time of the day, and as his eyes were no longer sharp he would get the child to tell him whether the master was there alone or with the mysterious woman who had dropped from the skies. That the child who had been provided for by the father of young Ashley should do this thing seemed to the old man to be highly appropriate.

And so, hand-in-hand, the young girl, so sweet

and fresh, in the early spring of her life, and the old man, so dried-up and withered, in the late autumn of his life, hurried along the rising ground until they came almost to the top of the ridge where stood the group of tall elms under whose protecting arms young Ashley was wont to lie; the farm beneath him on the left, the village and the churchyard on the right, and beyond these on both sides fields and trees, hills and valleys as far as the eye could see.

The deep ha—ha—ha—of a man came suddenly to old Sloke's ears. He pulled the little girl up short and stood quite still, listening intently.

Wonderingly, the little girl listened too, her chatter arrested by the expression on her companion's face.

They heard another light-hearted laugh, followed by the rumble of a man's voice.

"Can you see who it are, dearie?" whispered Sloke.

"No, Mr. Sloke; the tree's in the way."

"Do as Oi do, dearie, and say never a word."

The old man lowered himself with an effort on to his knees and started creeping on all fours through the undergrowth. The little girl, suppressing a laugh, followed his example.

"Now, can ye see, dearie?" asked the old man, putting his lips close to the child's ear.

"Yes, Mr. Sloke," she said, in the same tone.

"Ah! who be ut?"

"Master John, Mr. Sloke."

"Alone? Be he alone, a-talkin' an' laughin' to hisself over his book?" The clear ripple of a woman's laugh answered him. Old Sloke bent lower. "Who be that there with Master John?"

"Mrs. Weeks's lady, Mr. Sloke."

Old Sloke clutched the grass angrily. "Wot be she a-doin', dearie?" he asked.

"Sittin' up, pullin' grass, and lookin' down at Master John."

"An' wheer be Master John, dearie?"

"Lyin' down, lookin' up into the lady's face."

Old Sloke suppressed a groan. "An' what be his face like, dearie?"

"Like a man's who is very happy, Mr. Sloke. He is smilin', and his eyes look like mother's do when she looks at me."

The old man got up slowly and painfully, and took the child's hand.

On the way to the farm, he replied mechanically to the many questions put to him by his little friend, and when the farm was reached, sent her into the kitchen for the basket and then sat down, tired and spiritless, in his chair under the apple tree.

Old Ashley had asked him to see that no woman in rustling frocks ever came to the farm, and had spoken of his ardent hope that young Ashley should remain master of his soul. Old Sloke felt that he was responsible for the scene that had been described to him by the little girl. Had he not been the one to let the woman into the farm? What would the old master say to him when they met again? Did he deserve to be called a faithful servant?

The little superfluous girl trotted up and kissed him, and in her old-fashioned and pedantic way thanked him for his kindness.

He watched the little slip of a figure with the long, thin, black legs and blue sun-bonnet, until it went beyond his range of sight—not a long range these days—and then he went to the kitchen and gave his wife a faithful account of all that he had heard and seen.

Sarah Sloke's face during the recital flushed with excitement and beamed with delight.

"My dreams are a-comin' true!" she cried tremulously.

"Not if Oi can help it," said old Sloke.

"Not if you can help it? For the dear Lord's sake, what do ye mean, man?"

"What Oi say, Sarey," replied the old man, standing up to his wife squarely.

"But what's it got to do with you?" asked Mrs. Sloke irritably.

"Oi be responsible to t' wold master for the boy, Sarey, and it's got a fair lot to do wi' Oi," said the old man, with a glint in his eye that Mrs. Sloke had not seen there often.

But like a true woman, she held a brief for Love and all that it entails.

"If young Master John be a-goin' for to mate," she said, "all as we've got to do is to see that the nest is a-ready for 'im."

The old man's lips trembled with anger, and he brought his hand down with a bang on the table.

"Wife," he said, "don't never let Oi heer ye say such things again—never! If ye 'ave any respect for the memory and the wishes of t' wold master, ye'll do the best that's in ye to prevent Master John makin' a fule o' hisself wi' this 'ere 'ooman as no one knaws nothink about. Oi knaw my dooty, at any rate, and Oi shall speak to 'im sharp this night."

He turned on his heel and left the kitchen, leaving his old and faithful wife in tears. These were the first angry words the old man had ever spoken to her.

Sloke stumped down to the white gate and waited for young Ashley to return. He did not have to wait long.

The sun was setting. The swallows, in high spirits, flew shrieking round the house. A bat made an early appearance and performed a series of erratic movements among the pollards. Shadows lengthened as the West paid homage to the Sovereign, and it seemed to old Sloke as he watched Nature's great *coup de théâtre*, that the clouds formed themselves into a guard of honour. The sky, which had been splashed with the most gorgeous tints, took on a deeper tone, and as the old man heard young Ashley's quick steps on the road, became blood-coloured.

Young Ashley was singing as he came up the road. His head was flung back and his arms were swinging, and he walked on the tips of his toes. He did not wait to open the gate. Putting one hand on the top bar he vaulted it and ran up the path to the house.

"Dinner as soon as you like, old man," he sang out, and took the stairs to his bedroom three at a time.

Before dinner was cleared, young Ashley caught up his cap and went quickly to the door.

"Be ye goin' out again, master?" asked Sloke anxiously.

"Yes," said Ashley.

"Doan't 'ee go, master. Doan't 'ee."

The strangeness and the earnestness of the appeal twisted young Ashley round.

"Why not?" he asked.

So agitated that he could barely frame his sentences, the old man stepped forward.

"Oh, Master John, this 'ooman . . . wi' the white fingers . . . as coom so sudden . . . doan't 'ee, doan't 'ee . . . for your father's sake, as is gone to rest. . . ."

"Father knows," cried young Ashley. "Sloke, old man, I have told father. You won't understand me, but I have. He has let me off my promise, because every woman isn't alike. And this one . . . *this one*. . . ."

A gesture finished his sentence, a gesture that conveyed love and admiration and reverence too immense for mere words.

And then young Ashley caught up the hand of the old man, and laughed with a catch in his voice as he shook it.

"Wish me luck," he said. "I am going to be the happiest man on earth."

Part III
THE BLAZE

CHAPTER I

EVELYN BLUNDELL was the kind of man men call "a good chap," and women "a dear."

Justly so as men go. He lied as often but not more often than any of us. He played an excellent game of Bridge, and parted with money he couldn't afford to lose with invariable cheerfulness. He took chaff quite as well as he gave it, grumbled continually at his profession, and when he mugged up his work, he did so secretly, and was entirely devoid of buck. Like a healthy-minded Englishman, he roundly cursed whichever party was in power, and was willing, at any time, to teach any Cabinet Minister his job, whether it had to do with a subject of which he, Blundell, knew nothing or not. Like most of us, he was an expert only in those things of which he knew nothing. His temper was like a large check in Harris tweed—violent, but quite ordinary when you get used to it. He had an infinite capacity for martyrdom, and could draw generously upon a reserve fund of sentimentality at any moment. To

look at, he was no different from ninety-nine men out of a hundred—men, I mean, of some breeding, decently educated. He had a fairly steady, fairly clean eye, plenty of hair of a reddish tinge, crisp, and inclined to kink; a straight, thin nose, with well-cut nostrils; a short upper lip, a surly mouth, and a square-cut chin, which showed some pig-headedness, but very little strength.

Being thoroughly, soundly English—the Blundells dwelt in Kent ages before the Canterbury Pilgrims lowered the tone of the county—he possessed a keen sense of the ridiculous, but no sense of humour, and he was lucky enough to be able to cod himself—to use an excellent colloquialism—that whatever he did, however low, foolish, or mean, was done from motives in which neither of these three things found a place. He was no more sensual than any other healthy-minded man, and no less. He was, at the same time, just as selfish, and there was no man on earth with whom he got on better, or appreciated more, than Evelyn Blundell. His moral sense was sound. Not for a moment, however keen the temptation, would he have rendered any straight girl the worse for knowing him. Not for a moment, however strong the invitation, would he have tampered with the wife of a friend. With the wife of a man with whom he

was not on terms of friendship, it was, of course, a totally different matter. In that he was a sailor, and consequently away from his wife for long periods of time, he regarded himself as exempted from a too nice faithfulness.

On his training ship, Evelyn Blundell had been vastly popular. His naturally loud voice and self-assertive manner were mistaken for authority and strength. He had very genuine pluck, and threw himself heart and soul into work as well as into play.

Being the son of a poor parson, it goes without saying that entertaining was a pastime in which he never indulged. He had, however, the invaluable power of being able to accept hospitality and even gifts as though he were bestowing a favour. His selfishness was frank and unmistakable. There was nothing underhand about it. His companions either accepted him at his own valuation, or they were regarded by him as not being alive, except as butts for his rather clumsy sarcasm. What he didn't know was not worth knowing. He was never vicious, nor did he at any time, and on any excuse, tolerate low conversation. He swore soundly when occasion demanded it, but refused to punctuate ordinary small-talk with oaths. He was, however, a man very early in life. He had

his affairs of the heart, in which the heart was altogether on the other side. His taste lay in the direction of barmaids and shop-girls, by whom he was regarded as "quite the gentleman," and it was no extraordinary thing for him, after he had been some time in the Navy, to spend some portion of his leave at a second-rate London hotel *en famille*. He did it as well as he could afford in the most gentleman-like, unostentatious manner, keeping well out of the radius of his own set. He prided himself on always playing the game according to the rules in fashion at the time, and he paid his way honestly to the best of his ability. Being soundly, thoroughly English, he hunted when anyone offered him a mount, and, at all times, never lost an opportunity. As became the son of a clergyman, he had certain religious views, and acted up to them, so long as they didn't interfere too much with personal comfort. He was distinctly ambitious, and, being well aware that there was no royal road to success for men in his position and with his sound but modest connections, worked hard. He was often heard to say that it would not be his fault if he did not climb to the top of the tree. He never worked late at night. He regarded sleep as a necessity. He mapped out his day with

method instead. He had a natural liking for red-tape, and was a great stickler as to etiquette and form, and, having come to the conclusion that it was extremely wise to be popular with his superior officers, took good care never to be heard to grumble. He frequently did grumble, but only into the ear of a contemporary, in whom he placed implicit trust.

He did not look upon his having fallen in love with and become engaged to Betty as a false step likely to retard his advancement. After all, she was an extremely beautiful girl, who belonged to a highly respectable family. But he did consider, in his most secret moments, that he had allowed himself to be rushed into marriage rather too early in his career. He was, as a matter of fact, not quite sure that the kudos of being engaged to a girl so remarkably pretty as Betty was not sufficient. Nevertheless, having married her during the one impetuous and uncalculating moment of his life, he had played the game. He had put her into a flat that was well within his means, and made her a proper and adequate allowance upon which to keep up appearances. He had thoroughly enjoyed his honeymoon, took great pleasure in introducing his wife to his particular friends, and

when he joined the China squadron, left behind with his bankers full and complete instructions as to his wife's allowance, and much wisdom and common-sense with his wife. During his absence he wrote to Mrs. Blundell once a week—every Sunday afternoon. His letters were models of domestic epistles. He gave a full and detailed account of just so much as he considered necessary of the doings of the previous week, and never failed to request his wife to live well within the allowance he made her, and to make nice friends only.

Naturally, being a thoroughly sound Englishman, he never missed a safe opportunity of enjoying himself during his long absence from his wife, and when, finally, the time came for him to return home on leave, he did so with the esteem of his chiefs, the sincere regard of his brother officers, and the certain knowledge of promotion to a better station. It need hardly be added that he had saved money, and had the pleasure of seeing quite a respectable balance in his pass-book. In short, it is easy to claim for him the right to be called "a good chap" by men, and a "dear" by women.

As he neared the end of his homeward voyage, and read the bright, loving, trusting, eager letters

of the little woman who was his wife, written from the little village in which she was counting the minutes that brought him nearer, all the sentimentality, all the desire to make a martyr of himself, bubbled up and stirred what was best in his nature. He read the artless, affectionate letters with tingling cheeks and dim eyes, and, casting them back over the three years' separation, called himself, without really believing the things he said, blackguard and beast, and other exaggerated terms of abuse, because he thought it was the right thing to do. Implicitly believing that every word she wrote was true—was she not the woman he had married?—he worked himself into the not altogether unenjoyable belief that he was unworthy to black the little shoes in which she stood.

The beauty of the nights, the sentimental songs of the sailors, the "England, home, and mother" feeling that infected every man on board, had naturally something to do with it. However that may be, he continually found himself—and revelled in the discovery—standing apart from his brothers, chewing the cud, between the whiffs of his cigar, of bitterness and shame. He found himself lying awake at night and going without his usual amount of liquor.

"Poor little girl," he repeated to himself over and over again, looking at his wife's photograph in the moonlight; "poor little girl, how she loves me! What kind of man am I that she should adore me as she does? The three years I have been away must have appeared six to her. Yet to me . . . it seems only yesterday. . . . I've put in an excellent time too, done myself top-hole. What am I to say to her—a little woman so white, so pure, so faithful? It's all rot to suppose that because I've not been particular she ought not to have been. I am only a man, whereas she's my wife. But I rather wish . . . Oh, Lord! That's the worst of this beastly service. What's a man to do? Poor little girl, poor little girl! . . . What a rum thing it all is. If she'd done an eighth part of what I have, I should never live with her again. It's rough luck . . . but there it is."

CHAPTER II

TWO telegrams were handed to Blundell when H.M.S. *Gargantua* put in. They ran as follows :

"Welcome a thousand times. " BETTY."

And :

"Welcome ; come at once. " MILLY."

The first, which he had expected, gave him very little pleasure for that reason.

The second, totally unexpected, sent his heart beating half-a-dozen strokes faster to the minute.

Before he got into the train for London, he wired answers to them both. To the first :

"Safe and sound. Dying to see. Business keeps me to-morrow London. With you day after.

" EVELYN."

And to the second :

"Thousand thanks. With you to-morrow lunch.

" EVELYN."

"Come at once—Milly," he said to himself, as the train started. "What on earth . . ."

Much against his will a smile crept over his face, and he fingered the telegram with a sense of pleasurable excitement.

"Surely a little indiscreet? Milly's taken the flat, by a deuced curious coincidence, and, I expect, knows that Betty is in the country pining to see me. It must be something very urgent to make her ask me to go at once when one's wife . . . Illness, I should think. Or else something has leaked out. . . Good God! I hope not. It would never do just at this moment."

He said these things tragically enough; but the smile remained.

"Of course, past or no past, I couldn't possibly refuse to lunch with her. In a sense—in fact, *of course*—it's business. I hate lying! No doubt something's gone wrong with the flat, and I am wanted to see about it. My own sweet little Betty. . . (Come at once—Milly.) . . . Poor little girl! How glad she'll be to get me back again after all these years. (Come at once—Milly.) I wonder if she's changed at all. She's quite a little woman now. What a heap we shall have to talk about. (Come at once—Milly.) Miles from the station, eh?

That's it. And no sea in sight. Beastly sea, how I loathe it! (Come at once—Milly.) It makes me sick to think that I shan't be able to look her fair and square in the eyes. I wonder if any of the others would suffer as I do under these circumstances. They've put in a jolly sight better time—I mean, been very much worse—than I have during these three years. (Come at once—Milly.) I suppose I am a bit too sensitive. I suppose there are not a dozen men in the service who would understand the horrible shame I feel. (Come at once—Milly.) Gad! I wish I'd run on the straight. She has all my love, though. No one has ever or can ever share that with her. (Come at once—Milly.) The darling! What wonderful hair she's got. And how exquisitely beautiful and refined and dainty she is. (Come at once—Milly.) It's a great nuisance not being able to dash off to her to-night. I *do* think that Milly . . . However, poor old Mill, perhaps I can help her. She's in trouble. One couldn't possibly be hard-hearted enough to pay no attention to such a telegram as that. (Come at once—Milly.) And I have been looking forward all these years to seeing Betty directly I landed. I wonder what's goin' on in town? By Gad! I'll give myself a ripping little dinner—change of diet

will do me good—and do a theatre or a music hall. Something bright with some good swinging songs will help to drive away the fearful hump staying away from Betty will give me. (Come at once—Milly.) I don't think I've ever been so down on my luck in my life. A music hall, I think, and I'll see if I can't find a pal. Might possibly drop into supper at the Continental afterwards. Must do something to buck myself up. After all, what have I ever done that everyone else doesn't do? (Come at once—Milly.) Dearest little wife. Wife! What a lovely word it is. The most perfect, the most pregnant with meaning in the whole English language. (Come at once—Milly.) Country's looking nice, by Gad! Glorious place England, although it's so frightfully *effete*. Heavens! to get to town once more, and hear the old familiar roar. I'm looking forward like a kid to getting inside a hansom again! (Come at once—Milly.) Although, of course, I'm frightfully sick at being prevented like this from steaming down to Betty. My sweetheart! My own little wife! (Come at once—Milly.) What a funny thing it was — Cator dying two weeks after Betty and I were married. I wonder if I should have married Milly if I hadn't met Betty? She got all poor old Cator's money. Not enough to roll in, but a jolly useful

bit. I don't suppose I should, though. Men never marry the women they . . . and yet, she's a good sort. It was all because Cator was such a brute. She couldn't do without sympathy. The world would think pretty badly of us, I suppose. But it could never understand the feeling that inspired me. It was wrong, of course, but at least it gave her an interest in life—and nobody ever found out. How hard the world is on a woman who goes a bit off the straight. Brutes! But I'm glad I was safely married." (Come at once—Milly.)

Blundell took his wife's photograph out of his breast pocket, and sat looking at it in a wistful way for a long time. Many miles, many little farms tucked away in the creases of the hills, many golden fields of still corn, many hedges loaded with leaf, many villages bustling lazily, fell behind—the engine beating out a refrain to which "Come at once—Milly" fitted in constantly—before he found that he was looking at the photograph upside down. He whisked it round quickly, with a slight addition to his colour, kissed it, and put it back in his pocket. (Come at once—Milly.)

Sighing heavily, he shook open a paper and ran his eye down the entertainment advertisements. (Come at once—Milly.)

Adam's Clay

"A romantic drama in four acts," he read. "Armour, cymbals, silly fights. No thanks. A new and original farce in three. The new and original references to mother-in-laws and twins that I heard in my childhood. Not at any price. Not even on paper. Shakespeare. Never can hear what they're saying. No. Empire Ballet. Genée. . . . That's good enough! And one needn't put in an appearance before ten. Wish Betty were in town. How ripping to go together. I hate enjoying myself alone. Not that I *shall* enjoy it. I feel much too . . . sick with myself. . . ." (Come at once—Milly.)

CHAPTER III

AS his hansom cleared the station-yard and made its way into the street, Blundell forgot both women—his wife and the other. London leapt up in front of him. London—with its peculiar smell, its peculiar noises, its peculiar buildings, its peculiar traffic, its peculiar sameness—the ugliest, worse-kept, worse-swept, narrowest, most interesting city in the world.

It was half-past six in the evening. There was no wind, no breeze. The air which had been churned over and over during the day was dead and thick. The pavements were black with tired, spiritless people making their way home after work. 'Buses, loaded on top, crawled in long lines up and down the congested streets. Shrill-voiced papers boys shouted the latest winner, the insistent bells of motor cars rang sharply, and the never-ending crunching of wheels, the shuffling of thousands of feet, filled Blundell's ears like a familiar song.

As he approached Northumberland Avenue, and the Métropole, the sharp note of a coach-horn made

him lean forward eagerly, and a peal of the bells of St. Martin's brought a tightness to his throat.

He felt, as most of us have felt under similar conditions, that it was worth while to go away from London for three years in order to plunge back into it again. Its very ugliness impressed him. Its very narrowness struck him as curiously homely. Beyond a new building here and there, or an old one renovated and cleaned, everything was the same. The sounds were the same, the people were the same, the very smell was the same. He noticed with surprise and a touch of insular annoyance, a new smell, a smell with which he was quite unfamiliar. It was a thick, oily smell, that hit the back of his throat and made him cough, a smell that filled him with a sense of physical sickness. He looked angrily about him to see from where it came, and noticed that it was accompanied by a blue smoke. Suddenly there was a roar and a sound as though a thousand rusty chains had been raised by a tremendously powerful magnet and led, helter-skelter, across an acre of flints. With amazement, Blundeil gazed at a long, hideous, blatant machine, guided by a damned soul wearing oil-skins and an impertinent expression. It was covered with bills announcing that Edna May was presented by Charles Frohman in *The Belle of*

Mayfair every evening at 8.15. And Blundell knew.

As he passed rapidly along to his hotel, London got into his blood, and he felt an overwhelming desire—the desire that fills every man who has known it well, and been away from it for some time—to become one of the great crowd again.

With a sense of home upon him, a curious, warm exhilaration, he paid off the cab, booked a room, left his luggage with the hotel porters, washed hastily, and made his way into the street.

The day had been very hot. The sun, still warm, touched the tops of the buildings with a thin finger of gold, and made all the higher windows look as though they were on fire. He saluted in a shamefaced, sudden, self-conscious manner as he passed under the ineffably inadequate statue of Nelson, and made his way to the Haymarket.

He threw a shilling to a crossing-sweeper whose face he recognised, and stopped for a moment to read the bill outside the Haymarket Theatre. He went into the old-fashioned shop at the top of the street to get some cigarettes, and smoking one with rare enjoyment—they were no better than the ones with which his case was filled, but they were the ones he used to smoke—swung on quickly to his club in Piccadilly.

The porter looked up from a halfpenny racing paper and said, "Good evening, sir." A member who had lunched with him the day before he went away, three years ago, gave him a "How do?" as though he had seen him a few hours before. The waiter in the smoking-room answered his "Good evening" politely, uninterestedly, and brought him a whisky-and-soda.

There were the same faces, the same pictures, the same papers, containing pretty much the same matter. Nothing had altered. Everything was the same.

In ten minutes it seemed ridiculous, impossible that he had been away three years. Three days seemed nearer the mark, or three minutes. With a curious, uncomfortable feeling he went into the billiard-room. The two men who had been playing when he left were playing still. He would have sworn that both were dressed in exactly the same clothes.

He sat down and tried to imagine that he had really been on China seas. He tried to recall the sounds, the scents. He couldn't. He tried to remember the sing-songs on board under the deep sky in the moonlight. He couldn't.

"It's a dream," he said to himself. "I've been

lunching at the Berkeley, and have been to sleep for a couple of hours."

His cigarette went out, and he dived into his pocket for his match-box. He felt two pieces of thin paper. With some surprise he pulled them out. They were telegrams. One was signed "Betty"; the other "Milly." He read them with interest. "Queer," he thought. "Why do they say 'welcome' and want me to go at once, as though I had been away? I saw them both a few hours ago."

Then he shook himself and laughed.

"Ye gods," he said, under his breath, "what a quaint city it is. I believe they wash the streets down every morning with the waters of Lethe!"

CHAPTER IV

FORGETTING that he was in an English club—a London club, one of whose Honorary Presidents was a kind of Royal Duke—Blundell had been guilty of laughing aloud in the billiard-room.

His absence from home, the free-and-easy fellowship of the Navy, had naturally done something to round the fine edge of civilised behaviour. He caught the horrified glances of the billiard-players with surprise and a touch of truculence; only, however, until he realised, as he quickly did with tinglings of shame between the shoulder-blades, that he had committed a club crime of great enormity. Whereupon he hurried into the hall, and with a crestfallen expression took up the tape which was being ejected, with noisy irregularity, from a machine in an angle of the wall.

Upon the tape were the names of horses. He recognised none of them. With a growing sense of loneliness he turned to a second machine and watched a little hammer spell out, in jerks, the

proceedings in Parliament, the Law Courts, and other places of some importance. He read, with no interest, that Mr. Keir Hardie (continuing) said : "The Lords is a potty and a putrid institution which ought to be let on lease to Madam Tussaud . . . 5.35, Mr. Justice Darling, amid loud laughter, said that twins were regrettable accidents and parents unfortunate necessities. . . ."

He was just going to read the closing prices on the Stock Exchange when he heard a high-pitched voice in the outer hall which seemed familiar. He turned towards it with an eagerness that was not without a touch of pathos.

With a feeling of immense delight and relief he recognised Praise, a man he had consistently cut three years ago, because he regarded him, for no earthly reason other than that he wore a gold bangle and sunset socks, as a rather dangerous character.

"Hullo, Praise, old man!" cried Blundell heartily. "How *are* you?"

Odo Praise was one of those men no city and no club can afford to be without. He was the father of a great many of the most amusing expressions and stories in circulation, and most of those whose parents preferred to remain anonymous. "Have you heard Odo Praise's latest?" was a

question which had been asked for two years in all parts of London, including Bayswater, many times a day. In appearance he was strenuously bizarre. His features bore a strong resemblance to those of Nero. His hair, where it was not stained with a tincture of violets, was auburn, brushed straight back without a deliberate parting. So also was his moustache, which was a most amusing affair, consisting of fifteen bristles on one side of his nose and seventeen on the other side, twisted up the wrong way. He was tall and slight and unathletic, and he always wore curiously tight clothes designed by himself. His ties, of which he had an endless array, although he only wore one at a time, were Odoesque; that is to say, they consisted of some glowing material upon which was stencilled a list of his epigrams in Chinese characters, or a life-like representation of Limburger microbes at play. But it was in the matter of waistcoats and socks that he exercised the whole strength of his brilliant if somewhat impish imagination. For the former he was held in awe and admiration by undergraduates of all English-speaking universities, to say nothing of those in the United States, and for the latter there was not a single man or woman moving in the best society at

home and on the Continent who did not envy his temerity and endeavour to imitate his designs with cowardly emendations. With reluctance and regret he was a barrister who, while waiting for briefs which he thanked Heaven, and the solicitors of his acquaintance, for never sending him, improved the shining hour by drawing excruciatingly funny caricatures of his personal enemies, and by writing bewilderingly funny skits, sketches, articles, short stories, dialogues, and novels about whiskers and his personal friends. In regard to whiskers he looked upon himself as a man with a mission, and, quixotically brushing aside the appeals of his well-wishers, had done for "face-fittings" (as he called them) what Dickens did for preparatory schools—he had shown them up. The only thing he did besides drawing, writing, dressing, talking, and putting in good work with a knife and fork, was to ride every morning for an hour in the Row. He did not commit this commonplace for the sake of his liver. He disliked riding extremely. He rode, much against his better inclinations, because early in life he had designed a racing-stable waistcoat and a white bowler hat, and he rode in order to live up to these really amazing creations. This is the reason of his having recently been made the subject of a

new chapter in Fox's "Book of Martyrs." The chapter is headed "For the Sake of His Art." Apart from all his delightful and boyish eccentricities which he practised from an earnest humanitarian point of view — being anxious, above all things, to awaken laughter in a dull world — he was genuinely warm - hearted and sensitive. He numbered among his staunch friends statesmen, judges, dramatists, soldiers, actors, critics, Bridge-players, peers, non - smokers, barristers, other conversationalists, would - be jokers, and Mr. Brittle.

He crinkled up his eyes and looked at Blundell for a moment without recognising him.

"Oh—er—let me see . . . why, it's E. Blundell, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Blundell. "How goes it, my dear fellow?"

"Oh, so - so," replied Prazé, looking slightly surprised at the other's unaccustomed exuberance. "Don't seem to have seen you about recently. Thought you'd chucked the club. Eh?"

"No, I've been away, you know."

"Oh, have you? Where, eh?"

"China."

"Good Lord! Why, eh?"

Blundell laughed. "Have you forgotten what my job is?"

Praze tapped a cigarette on a gold case and showed a set of brilliantly successful teeth.

"Well, 'pon my word, I . . . not Army; what?"

"Not much," said Blundell loyally; "Navy."

"Oh, ah, yes, of course. You're a jolly Jack-tar, a handy-man, as they say in the music halls. You look beautifully tanned, eh? Wish I could tan like that. I'd give five years—no, I wouldn't, not now—I'd give a week of my life, anyway—holy week, for choice—to be able to put on such a colour. How long did it take yer, eh?"

"Rather more than three years."

Praze arrested his hand in the action of striking a match on a box that was attached to a gold chain fastened to a trouser button.

"What!" he cried, with rather overdone surprise. "Do you mean to tell me that you haven't been in the club for three years? I could have sworn that it was only six weeks ago that I saw you hidin' your broolly under your overcoat here! B' Jove, how that old devil Time sprints on the tan. As I have frequently said, the old person with the sickle is the leading runner of our epoch. But don't

let's stand in this dashed draught. Come inside and take one."

Blundell gladly followed Prazé along the tiled passage that looked as though it led to a public wash-house, and sat down at a round table with a marble top.

"You drink with me," he said.

"Not me," said Prazé. "It's my funeral. Don't entertain a man who's been out of things for half a century every day of the week. Whisky, eh?"

"Thanks, and soda."

"No, no, not soda. Soda's fizzled out. Nowadays one drinks the water they clean the windows of the *Daily Mail* with. It's good for the gout." He beckoned to a waiter and made it so, quite delighted with Blundell, who had given an incredulous smile at his last remark.

"Three years away from London, eh?" he continued. "You must feel like Alice in Wonderland."

"No," said Blundell; "everything's exactly the same as when I went away."

"The same!" cried Prazé; "the same!"

"Well, isn't it?"

"*My dear feller!* . . ." There was a world of pity in the voice. "Oh, but b' Jove, this is splendid!"

Prazé arranged himself in his chair, touched his

tie, hitched up his trousers in order that Blundell might share in the ineffable delights of socks of a sugar-stick design in silk, turned his signet ring crest upwards, and lit a cigarette.

"Here's a rippin' chance for a bit of good work. A bright conversationalist don't get an opportunity like this once in a thousand years. Let me have the felicity of leadin' you by the . . . the tough—if you will permit me to say so in its complimentary sense—sun-tanned hand through three eventful years."

"Right O!" said Blundell, examining his companion's waistcoat with awe and fright.

"The devil of it is to know where to begin. If I were to say to you, with a graceful wave of my lily hand, 'My dear old feller, the quite extraordinary changes that have taken place in this our city are summed up in the three cad words: "London County Council";' you, in your fine ozone manner, would reply, 'What in Hades are you drivin' at?'"

"I shouldn't have said Hades."

Praze shot a double cuff.

"Whimsical Walkley has had a marked effect upon me. I frequently find myself putting simple words into Latin. I promise to do my best not to err again. . . . Yes, my dear E. Blundell, we are under

the side-spring boot of Nonconformity. London, yea, and even Britain, once so bold and free, has fallen into the hands of hypocrites in little black ties and dickies, sinners in india-rubber collars, old persons with an incurable itch for newspaper notoriety and love of tub-thumpin'—who naïvely sprinkle one another with honorary degrees, and are tearfully indignant when they are called dishonest—by rasping ex-engineers and plumbers and mayors, who were more anxious to hobnob with canny baronites and seaside peers in the House of Commons on a salary than to plumb in that station of life into which no one would willingly have put them—Radicals always were the most beautiful snobs on earth—and last but not least, George Bernard Shaw. The latter is the silver lining to the cloud. Oh, England, my England! Do you follow me?"

"Er . . ." said Blundell.

Praze patted the sailor's arm.

"Don't apologise, Cap," he said. "I will translate. In penny-plain English I am drivin' at this awful statement of fact. All the members of the London County Council and the National Liberal Club have been returned to Parliament. Hence these tears. I give you this in English and don't encroach on

the Walkley patent, because, as a man of his word, I am the leading case of our time. . . . The effects of this social upheaval are appallin'! England, its fine sense of dignity, its dull and portly pre-eminence, its military and naval proud incompetence, its glorious and unique unpicturesqueness are being tram-carred out of existence. 'Dr.' Stiggins, 'The Reverend' Mr. Huggins, the Rt. Hon. John Buggins, Mr. Alpheas Niggins, L.C.C., and Mr. H. W. Miggins, the eminent penny-a-liner, have run amok through the great traditions and institutions of this our country. They have clothed Britannia in reach-me-downs, and washed the Union Jack in a strong solution of mottled soap. The lion and the unicorn they have replaced by a hyena and a coster's donkey, and they have made Gog and Magog sign the pledge. They have given a month's wages to St. George in lieu of notice, and have presented the dragon to the Carnegie Free Library at Lavender Hill."

"Yes," replied Blundell; "I remember hearing that the Radicals had lied themselves into power."

"Oh, the rumour reached you, eh?"

"Yes. That's to say, I could have read it in the English papers if I hadn't been more interested in

cricket and police news. A jolly nice place the House of Commons now, I should think!"

"Well," said Prazé, looking with affectionate interest at his finger-nails, "from having been a great success as a comedy and the best club in the country, it has developed into a knock-about show, and a Young Men's Christian Association without the Christianity."

"Beastly shame," cried Blundell.

"But these are not the only things that have happened in your absence," continued Prazé, with intense enjoyment. "It is not too much to say—to employ a cliché of the dramatic critic with a disease that is known as 'the literary tendency'—that every blessed thing has undergone a change. Society, for instance, is no longer immoral. It eats little and drinks less, and has taken to marrying the chorus-girl whom, in your time, it blatantly placed in Curzon Street. As a natural consequence, there are few domestic servants left. They are all mistresses—I mean wives, of course."

"Rot," said Blundell.

"Oh well, I dunno," replied Prazé thoughtfully. "Early training will enable them to keep their houses in order, eh? As to the stage, the old smug talk of its being an educative force and so forth has

died the death. Theatres are now frankly run as places of amusement, and are for the most part catered for by young men who have no respect for the memory or the methods of old man Ibsen. So all our pieces are musical, with one or two brilliant exceptions. It need hardly be said, Cap, that the leading lady and gentleman who scorn to learn high kicking are now only to be seen among first-night audiences in bitter conversation with those of our critics who still talk about 'presentment of life,' and all that kind of rot. Thank Heaven, there are doosed few of those wordy jokers left. All our really good critics write plays themselves, and know full well—you don't mind my sayin' full well, eh? It's Beerbolmian. I am his Columbus—I say, know full well that directly the stage makes any serious attempt to reflect life as we know it, all the theatres will be taken over by Wesleyan Missions. Eh?"

"Ha, ha!" replied Blundell, beginning to feel slightly fogged.

Praze looked at him as an equilibrist looks at a dull matinée audience when, after he has nearly broken his neck, he receives feeble and scattered applause. Being, however, a conscientious conversationalist—that is to say, a man who talks for his own enjoyment first—he started again.

"Art—as we still call English painting—is much as you left it. The Academy continues to give space only to the work of amateurs and R.A.s, in order that the so-called art critics may continue to grow hysterical on the subject of values and middle distances, and architecture has fallen into the hands of Tom Jerry, the speculative builder. His work chiefly consists in pulling down the exquisitely ugly and putting up the hideously pretty. The constitution of London has been completely undermined by tubes. As these fuggy things don't pay, company promoters are busy making more of 'em. You've noticed the motor 'bus, eh?"

"My Lord, yes," said Blundell, making a face.

"Exactly," said Prazé. "And now I must go to the Library and put all this down before I forget it. It'll do nicely for the next issue of the *P.M.G.* By-by." He got up and screwed his mouth into a smile. "Quite mad," he said, with an air of pride. Then he twisted round and walked away on his heels.

As he made his way upstairs, he remembered, with a slight sense of consternation, that he had omitted, for the first time for three years, to bring in the word "whiskers."

He made up for it, however, in his delightful article.

CHAPTER V

BLUNDELL had dined well, and his second cigar was more excellent than the first. He watched two turns from his stall at the Music Hall with some amusement—one devoted to a fat lady in blue tights who sang sentimental songs with a strong Cockney accent, and the other to a troupe of Swiss acrobats with greasy hair and oily smiles—and then went up to the promenade, rather hoping he might meet someone he knew. He felt more lonely and insignificant than ever.

The dining-room of the Métropole had been well filled. He knew no one. The people seemed to be mostly Americans from the queerness of their clothes and hair, and people from Bootle and Kettering, from the commonplace cut of their faces.

After searching, almost eagerly, among the heterogeneous crowd which moved backwards and forwards for a face that he knew without success, he leant over the velvet back of the partition and listened, with a queer sense of being a mere atom,

a unit, to the orchestra, which was an excellent one. A selection of "Il Pagliacci" rose above the babble of tongues, and its passion, its jealousy, its despair, touched the note of sentimentality within him, and made him long eagerly to see his wife again. Yet, as he listened, and as he conjured up to his mind the face and figure of his beautiful little wife, the only words the ringing music sang to him were: "Come at once—Milly, Milly."

He shook himself, realising for the shade of an instant that the intervention of Milly at such a moment was not cricket. It was too exciting, too pleasant to be permitted. Metaphorically giving himself the command to "eyes right," he brushed the other woman's name out of his mind and resolutely replaced that of his wife. Whereupon the music bored him and he turned his back upon the orchestra and watched the ever-moving crowd.

It was made up mainly of old and elderly men who ought to have known better, boys who knew nothing or too much, and the refuse of France, Germany, Switzerland, and Russia in second-hand Ascot frocks. They were there, by permission of the London County Council, for the purpose of damaging the constitution of England's manhood, and they sat and walked about, obviously unhealthy,

with a blatant frankness that was amazing, to the great benefit of the shareholders of the concern.

Even Blundell, who rarely bothered himself to think about matters which were not of immediate personal moment, gave a grunt of disgust at the cowardly and smug hypocrisy of the half-educated people who make the bye-laws for the government of London.

Rather pleased with himself at the application of the phrase, he called their method of dealing with a problem long ago successfully overcome by France, the policy of the ostrich, and scoffed at the idiotic vigilance of the police, who hustled and harried the person who could not afford to pursue her business on premises licensed to sell wines, spirits, and tobacco, and looked with a tolerant and even admiring eye on her more successful sister who arrived at and departed from the gilded and be-marbled building in a hansom cab.

Realising at once, in a manner that was wholly and superbly insular, that, after all, the matter had nothing to do with him, Blundell studied the clothes and manners of these desirable aliens with amusement. They were all scrupulously in the fashion, and nearly all had gold chain purses hanging from a white-gloved finger. Some walked with parasols,

much laced, and others cultivated the kangaroo-like walk which is rendered necessary by the tyranny of those portions of a woman's costume which are beautifully reproduced weekly in all self-respecting illustrated papers devoted to the theatre and sport.

Others sat on the long, narrow seat under the wall in haughty attitudes, but with watchful eyes, nodding to and examining, either with scorn or envy, the clothes of business rivals. A few watched the various turns with interest and hummed the airs played by the band with the quiet patronage of the season ticket-holder.

All, of course, held short, interrogatory conversations with passers-by, and Blundell was frequently asked if he was "alrite, dear," by the more energetic person who considered it good policy to rove.

After the band had finished its selection, to which no one paid the slightest attention, the "turns" were continued.

A man in an artistic selection of rags, with a vivid red nose, whitened eyes, and a mass of unkempt hair, made his appearance. He was evidently a great popular favourite. He was received with rapturous applause that must have continued for at least a minute.

Blundell looked eagerly at his programme. No.

15, he saw, was "Muggins, the King of Kidders." The name was unknown to him, but he made up his mind that the man was a great artiste of some kind or another.

He was right. No man who played Hamlet or Othello, or who sang the glorious but quite unsingable music of Wagner in this or any other epoch, could hold a candle to Muggins as an "artiste."

Like all men of genius, he was simple and direct. He merely fell over imaginary pins with great violence and proceeded to brush his rags tenderly with a series of brushes, which he collected from a cavern in his trousers, and which, growing larger after every fall, were stuck in a line into the stage. Every time he fell, the drummer in the orchestra celebrated the event with enthusiasm.

Not a word was spoken by the artiste from New York, though he sometimes took it into his head to remove dozens of collars. Finally, when he thought that his audience must be saved from hysterics, he fell backwards over the footlights and hit the drum himself, and then, climbing back upon the stage, left it to thunders of applause.

With the tears streaming down his face, Blundell thanked Heaven that he belonged to a country that recognised and appreciated greatness.

As the numbers of the next turn were shot into their slots by two powdered attendants in the Royal livery, Blundell felt a hand upon his arm.

"I say, be a brick, and let me lean on the barrier, will you? There are no seats left, and I'm doggo."

He turned quickly, and looked down at a young woman with a pretty, tired face, dressed smartly and well.

"Oh, do," said Blundell, making way for her.

"Thanks, very much. You can look over my head, can't you?"

"Oh, that's all right."

The girl put her elbows on the barrier to support her, and leaned back with a sigh. She faced Blundell, and screwing up her eyes, examined him expertly.

"You've just come back from abroad," she said quietly.

"Yes," replied Blundell, glad to find someone to speak to.

"You don't find sun in this country to make your face that colour."

"It's your country, isn't it?"

"Oh, yes," she said, with a laugh. "I wasn't made in Germany."

"I thought you spoke English like a native."

"Well, rather. I read the Bible to my father night and morning for fifteen years, and that's supposed to be the best English going."

"Yes," said Blundell, feeling a trifle shocked; "I suppose so."

The girl was quick to notice the inflection of his voice.

"Oh! you needn't talk to me if you'd rather not," she said.

Blundell bent forward politely. "Oh, please," he said. "Ah—honoured and delighted!"

"Piffle!" said the girl, looking pleased. "I know all about you in once. You're an Irish sailor."

"Wrong as to the nationality," laughed Blundell.

"A sailor, anyway. You all say 'Ah' like that, and bob your head when you're coddin' politeness. I've met lots of you. You're all so jolly well shaved, too, when you *do* shave, and you never put stuff on your hair. On leave?"

"Yes, thank the Lord!"

"Goin' to put in a good time?"

"Hope so."

"Can I be—"

Blundell stopped the remark with a laugh. "You don't let the grass grow, do you?"

"Well, things are jolly bad," said the girl, making

a wry face. "One has to hustle these times, I can tell you. I don't know what's comin' over this country, 'pon my word! Radical Government, I say." Blundell shot back his head and gave a loud guffaw. "What yer laughin' at?"

"I'm sorry. But that's what . . . a man put all sorts of horrors down to this afternoon."

"Well," said the girl, with a touch of annoyance, "he knows something. I've given up readin' about em in the paper now. They make me depressed."

"Why?" asked Blundell, noticing that she was the possessor of an extremely pretty neck.

"Oh, they're such a common lot. There's one man there with a queer Scotch name who makes me sick. He's always askin' someone to cut down someone else's salary. He's no earthly good himself, and hates to see others making a bit. A tyke, I call a man like that; don't you, dear?"

"Er . . . yes," said Blundell, who had not been listening.

Her ears, he found, were very pretty also, and her hair curled very charmingly on her forehead.

"Where did you dine to-night?"

"Métrôpole."

"Métrôpole? Oh, I know. I've never been there. Do you well?"

"Oh yes." Her eyebrows were *not* made up, he discovered.

"I once stayed with a hop merchant at a hotel rather like that at Margate, for a fortnight. Nice old thing he was. Big eater, and travelled with seven bottles of hair wash. Nearly bald, too. You *are* funny, some of you. . . . You seem to find me a quiet kind of joke by the way you're grinning."

Blundell touched her hand with his finger. "You're a jolly little thing," he said.

"I say," she said suddenly, looking at him with a reminiscent eye.

"Well? "

"Haven't we met somewhere before? "

"No," said Blundell, rather hurriedly. "At least, I don't think so. Why? "

"I dunno. . . . I could swear I'd seen you before when you smile. And the way you threw back your head when you laughed just now seemed . . . Oh, what's the word? "

"Familiar? "

"Yes. Are you sure you've been abroad? "

"Quite sure."

"You're such liars, most of you. Oh well, it don't matter. Anyway, I rather like you."

"Oh, honoured, really."

"All right. There's no need to be sarcastic. I'm not talkin' business. I *do* like you, and there it is. You've talked away to me as though I was—oh, you know—a respectable shopee or something of the kind. It makes a bit of a change. Well, it's no good my hangin' about any longer. The show'll be over in seven minutes. I'll say good-night, and get off home."

She waited for a moment and looked at him quizzically. There was something a little sad in her tired smile.

Blundell noticed it.

"Poor little wretch," he thought. "What a life! The Métropole will be beastly lonely, and Betty wouldn't mind my just seeing her home. . . . It'll be doing the girl a kindness to be treated as if she were . . . a respectable shopee, as she calls it."

"How are you going?"

She looked at him eagerly. "Oh, walking. Can't afford to drive these times."

"Come along, I'll drive you."

"Thanks awf'ly," she said.

She led the way through the crowd with a suspicion of triumph in her manner. A tall woman in an extraordinary hat winked at her as she passed.

An elephantine attendant, in a vivid uniform

wearing the ribbons of several medals, called a cab, and the girl jumped in.

"Where?" asked Blundell.

"Oh, just say home. *He* knows."

Blundell said "Home." The cabman lifted the reins with the butt-end of his whip and grinned.

With some difficulty the cab turned into a long stream of cabs, carriages, motor cars and motor 'buses, and was borne slowly along up Coventry Street.

The theatres were just over, and the pavements were filled with masses of hurrying people. A slight rain was falling, and the shining street threw back the reflection of the innumerable electric lights.

"Comfortable?" asked Blundell.

"Rather," said the girl, leaning back in the cab and putting her hand through his arm in a friendly manner.

"I think I'd better tell the man to put the window down. You'll get wet."

"Oh, no. Let's get some air. That place was so fuggy."

Blundell took her hand.

The cab turned into the Haymarket. The glare of the lights on the roof of His Majesty's Theatre had something pleasantly barbaric about it.

Blundell felt in better spirits. The horrid feeling of loneliness had lifted.

"Wonderful place, London," he said.

"Um! I suppose so."

"I saw in the paper to-day that London was empty." He nodded towards the crowd.

"Yes, they have a lot of space to fill somehow," said the girl dryly.

As they passed the Carlton, Blundell bent forward and watched a very young man help a pretty and petulant-looking girl with her hair in a queue out of an electric brougham.

"What a charming child," he said.

"An amateur," replied his companion scornfully. "Do you know the man?"

"Not from Adam."

"Lord William Ascot."

"Oh, the son of a man in the Cabinet."

"Don't know anything about his father. We know *him* as 'Billy Softy.' He's in the Guards. He's just bought a gold bed for that baby."

"A gold what?"

"Bed! Never heard of a bed? She's a 'foot-light favourite,' you know. Haven't you seen her photograph in all the illustrated papers taken in bold attitudes in a bath-wrap or a dusting-sheet?"

You noticed the man who called our cab? He's her father. They *do* say that she'll be Lady William one of these days."

"*Nonsense!*"

"It's the only way for those young men to get interviewed in the papers. Eton, Sandhurst, St. George's Barracks, Gaiety Theatre—that's the programme. Oh, the peerage is going very strong these times, I can tell you. Hops, tobacco, *Comic Cuts*—there's nothing to live up to, y'see."

The cab turned into Buckingham Palace Road. The rain fell more heavily. The road was quiet and clear of traffic.

"Much farther?" asked Blundell.

"Pimlico," said the girl.

"I was born in Pimlico," said Blundell irrelevantly.

"Which part?"

"St. George's Square."

"Funny," said the girl. "I look at the backs of those houses from my window."

Blundell dropped the girl's hand. With the primness that is peculiar to Englishmen he wished that he had not mentioned the matter. A queer, uncomfortable, almost superstitious feeling crept over him. What would his mother have said, he thought . . . and stopped thinking at once. What

was the good of thinking? The fact remained that he was hideously lonely, and was merely performing an act of kindness in seeing a poor little girl home late at night. He was only saving her from a long walk in the rain when she was tired and unable to afford to get wet. It was perfectly true that he need not have been alone, that if he had played the game he would, by this time, have been in the country, talking to the wife who loved him so dearly. . . .

That also was a matter about which it was totally unnecessary to think. Milly wanted him. ("Milly, Milly, b' Jove!")

"I didn't *ask* you to hold my hand," said the girl petulantly.

"What? . . . Oh, I'm sorry. I was . . . er . . ."

"Yes, I know. Thinkin'. I often . . . don't. Only fools think. Wise people just live and let it go at that."

The cab drew up at a dingy, flippant house. Its doorway had shabby columns. A light was burning in a window of a room in the area. The blind was pulled aside as Blundell threw back the cab doors and someone peeped out. A black cat arched a thin back and rubbed its ribs against the railings, mewing.

Blundell jumped out and held his hand over the wheel.

"Thanks," said the girl. "Good-night." She hurried up the steps and fumbled for a key.

Blundell paid the cab, sprang up the steps, and stood by the girl.

"Look here," he said; "it's early yet, and I funk that lonely hotel. Have you any objection to my coming up and smoking a cigarette?"

The girl darted a glance at him.

"You *are* a rum 'un," she said, with a laugh. She put the key in the lock, turned it, and opened the door. "Let the cat in, will you?"

Blundell followed her into a narrow hall in which there was an unglobed gas-jet burning low. He could see a hat-stand, several of whose pegs were broken, and he noticed that the pattern of the oil-cloth on the floor was almost rubbed away.

"Come on," said the girl. "Top floor. Fine exercise."

He shut the door stealthily and padded up the creaking stairs carefully. He felt excited and amused and a little nervous. There was a frightfully stuffy smell about the house.

"Better stay where you are till I light up," said the girl, opening her door. "You won't bless me if you bark your shins against my—what do you call it?—Elizabethian furniture."

CHAPTER VI

BLUNDELL obeyed.

He heard the girl go into the room, fumble for a moment, with mutterings of annoyance, and strike a match. From below came the sounds of a bolt shot back and of someone coughing.

When the gas was lighted Blundell found himself on the threshold of a fairly large room. It was furnished cheaply, but was clean, tidy, and prettily arranged. A screen, upon which were pasted hundreds of picture postcards of actresses, cricketers, famous soldiers, statesmen, clergymen, and jockeys, cut off a large corner of the room. Upon the table was a bowl of fresh flowers and several paper-covered shilling editions of novels. Two large cane arm-chairs stood before a fireplace, in the grate of which there was a large fern in a pot tied up with a bright red piece of some kind of material. Between the two windows there was a dressing-table and looking-glass. One of the windows was open at the top, and the atmosphere of the room was fresh.

"Jolly room," said Blundell. He entered and took off his coat and hat.

"Oh, it does," said the girl.

Standing before the glass she removed her hat, touched her hair here and there, and then drew off her gloves, blew into them and carefully laid them out upon the table.

"Do you mind if I put on a pair of bedroom slippers? My feet get so drawn in these tight shoes."

"Oh, please!" said Blundell, sitting down with his back to her.

The girl looked grateful and smiled at the back of his head. She changed her shoes and took the opportunity of running a powder puff lightly and expertly over her face.

"You've got cigarettes, I suppose?" she asked.

"May I? Thanks very much."

She sat in the other chair and leaned back with a sigh, letting her arms hang down limply. Her eyes closed and she breathed a little heavily.

"Poor little girl!" said Blundell gently. "Worn out, aren't you?"

"Oh, no," she replied, forcing a smile. "Only a bit fagged."

"Been in this room long?" asked Blundell.

"Ever since I . . . nearly all the time," she replied.

There was a note in her voice that touched him deeply.

"I say, my dear child, why ever did you . . .?"

She kicked the fender.

"Oh, look here," she said, rather loudly, "steer clear of that, *please*. . . . I've got some whisky if you'd like some."

"No thanks," said Blundell. "But er—can't I mix you one?"

"Oh, Lord, I *do* wish you would. I'm sorry, but I don't feel like ever moving again. It's over there in that cupboard. You'll find the key in that hat-box, under the tissue-paper at the bottom."

Blundell found it and the whisky. The girl drank it eagerly and gave him back the glass.

"I always liked sailors," she said, "worse luck!"

Blundell bent down and kissed her.

With a self-conscious laugh, he put the glass on the table, lit a fresh cigarette, and put his elbow on the mantel-board. There were several unframed photographs upon it. He eyed them indifferently, until he caught sight of one representing a round-faced, rather confident youth in the uniform of a

naval cadet. He plucked it up quickly and looked at it with his mouth open.

"Great Caesar's ghost!" he said, with a gasp.

"What's the row?" asked the girl, who had leaned back again and shut her eyes.

With an expression of growing horror, amazement, and recognition, Blundell looked at the slight figure lying in the chair in front of him. "To Alice" was written in a large round hand upon the photograph, which was of himself.

"Good God!" he cried. "*You!*"

The girl sat up quickly with startled eyes. She saw that he held a photograph. She saw the horror in his expression. She sprang to her feet and snatched the photograph away from him. Her eyes moved from the photograph to Blundell's face and back again to the photograph.

She gave a cry between a sob and a laugh, threw the photograph on to the table, and caught up Blundell's hands and commenced wringing them gladly, warmly.

"Oh—oh—oh . . ." she cried. "*It is you, it is you. I thought I knew your face, I thought I did. Didn't I ask you—didn't I? Oh—oh . . . I am so glad, I am so glad. Mr. Blundell, dear Mr. Blundell. . . . Fancy, after all these years, meeting you like*

this. Just fancy. Oh—oh . . . I *am* so glad. Mr. Blundell . . . Oh—oh . . . You remember? . . . The little tobacco shop, with the polished case with the glass top down the middle, and all the pipes glistening on red velvet? And the weekly papers all neatly arranged on a long table on the other side, and the shiny counter smelling of snuff? And me, in a neat black dress down to my ankles, with an edging of white round the neck, sitting by the window doing crewel work? . . . And father in a black tie doing the books in the little parlour, with the door open so as to keep an eye on you boys when you came in to buy cigarettes and say bashful things to me? . . . Oh—oh . . . Mr. Blundell, Mr. Blundell!"

She stopped for breath.

The eager rush of words, the pathetic girlishness and simplicity of her joyful recognition, stirred Blundell and brought a lump to his throat. This was the little girl with the great eyes with whom he had fancied himself to be in love all those years ago—in love for ever and ever, honestly, deeply in love; the little girl dressed like a Quaker, with the earnest face and sweet, frank smile. . . .
This!

The girl stood still for a moment with heaving

bosom, waiting for him to say something—something kind.

Realising instantly why she waited, Blundell forced the expression of horror out of his face, and smiled at her and took her hand with a gesture of chivalry, respect, and frank pleasure.

“Alice! . . . By Jove, isn't this ripping?”

She gripped his hand tightly and held it against her heart. Gratitude left her wordless. Tears sprang to her eyes and her lips trembled.

With an effort Blundell pursued his line of action, overdoing it, perhaps, in his sympathetic endeavour to gloss over the frightful change that had taken place in the girl's life and environment.

“You've—you've hardly altered a bit,” he said. “I should have known you at once, if—if it hadn't been for the lights and all that.”

She shook her head and smiled through her tears. But she put her other hand upon his arm.

“Honest Injun, b' Jove!” he said. “Dear little Alice, I am glad to see you again.”

“You're the first who knew me in the old days—I—I've spoken to since—”

He cut in hastily. “It isn't late. Sit down again and let's have a good long yarn.”

He placed her in her chair and returned to his

own. He saw that her hands were trembling. His own were not steady.

There was a painful pause. Blundell tried to think of some commonplace thing to say, something which would not strike a wrong note.

"I—er . . . I—er—" he began lamely.

She bent forward and put her hand on the arm of his chair.

"Mr. Blundell," she said, "you did it splendidly, but don't try any more. I understand, and I . . . I'm very, very grateful."

"Oh, Alice," cried Blundell, with all the best of his nature stirred, "why—why . . ."

"I fell in love with a gentleman," she said quietly, "who was in love with me. He asked me to run away with him, and not knowing what . . . having been brought up so carefully . . . never having been told . . ."

Blundell flung out a blasphemous exclamation.

"The brute!" he cried. "He promised to marry you and didn't."

"No; he never promised to marry me. He only just asked me to go away with him."

"Well?"

"He took me to Cornwall in the summer-time—such a lovely place! I thought we were going to

stay there always. But when his leave was up . . .”

“His leave? He wasn't one of us, was he? One of the old lot?”

“Yes; and when his leave was up he took me back again and I went home to wait for him. At least I tried to go home. I forgot . . . I didn't think what it meant in those days—that father was religious. . . . When I walked into the dear little shop there was a stout, middle-aged woman in a lace collar sitting in my place. She saw me and gave a cry. Father was in the parlour doing the books. He looked up and came out, with the veins swelling in his forehead. He drew back when I put out my arms, and made a queer face and told me to get out and never come back. He quoted some of the words in the Bible that I had often read to him, but never understood. I understood then and went away.”

“Good God!” cried Blundell.

“Religious people are like that,” said Alice. “I took lodgings in the town for a week, and wrote to the gentleman and told him what had happened. He sent me money, asked me to write once a week, and said he was awfully sorry, and wished he had never taken me away. I stayed in those rooms for

two months, and then no more letters came and no more money. With what I had left I went to London to find work. I answered an advertisement for a general servant, no other kept. The lady was a Nonconformist, like father, and her house was in the suburbs. I told her I had quarrelled with my father and had no references. She took me for a week on trial on condition that she was to examine my box every night. I was kept on until she noticed . . ."

She stopped, and a little smile crept into her face, a smile that is worn by the little statues in the Normandy churches.

Blundell cleared his throat.

"And then," said Alice, "she said much the same things father had said, and told me to go. I had saved my wages, thinking, perhaps, that as she was religious too, I should not be allowed to stay, and I took a room near Westminster Bridge. Lying there and thinking of Cornwall was easy, because the bells on the tram horses were like the bells on the sheep. . . . It was a boy. A boy! with eyes like his, the same blue, merry eyes. . . . We were very happy until the money was gone, and then . . . I woke up. The landlady gave me a fortnight to find work, and lent me money to buy food with. Somehow everyone seemed to know about baby. I wrote again to the

gentleman to his ship, but there was no answer. At the end of the fortnight, the landlady came up and told me that she would put me into a far better way of making money than getting work. And she took me out into the streets. . . ."

Blundell sprang to his feet. "The wretch," he shouted, "the filthy wretch."

"Baby is fifteen now," she said quietly. "He's a sailor too—a common sailor—or will be when he leaves the training ship. I see him at Christmas and in the summer. He thinks I'm a widow working in a shop. When he is with me, we go down near the sea and take rooms. I save up for those times, and they make up for everything."

Blundell walked up and down the room. His face was flushed, his hands clenched, and his eyes bloodshot.

"A gentleman," he kept repeating, "a gentleman. . . . One of us—one of the old lot. . . . By God! if only I knew which. . . . Alice, who was it?"

"No," said Alice.

"Is he alive?"

"Yes," said Alice.

"How do you know?"

"I saw him one night last year. He was with a friend where you met me to-night. He looked

brown like you, and was just the same merry . . . He didn't know me, but when he saw me he smiled and came up . . . and I ran away."

The sweat broke out on Blundell's forehead. He couldn't stand still. An agony of self-reproach, self-disgust, and impotent rage swept over him. His memory rose up like a judge. He felt like a criminal just sentenced.

"What unthinking brutes we are," he said; "what d—d unthinking brutes!"

Alice rose and opened a little box with a key fastened to a thin gold chain that hung round her neck. With tender, proud fingers she brought out a photograph of a boy in sailor clothes, with a fresh, frank face and sturdy limbs.

"Look!" she said.

Blundell looked. "Fawcett—Fawcett, by God!" he shouted.

The girl caught the photograph out of his hand. "No, no, no!" she cried. "No!"

"Yes, yes," said Blundell, anger making his voice thick.

The girl drew herself up. Her face was pale beneath her paint.

"No," she said, "as God's my judge!"

Blundell stared into her face. Her eyes were

steady and her lips firm. Her love was greater than her sense of truth.

With a feeling of intense relief, Blundell accepted her word. Fawcett had been his best man.

While Alice put the photograph back into its place with trembling fingers, Blundell pulled himself together.

"When are you to see the boy next, Alice?" he asked.

"I'm afraid I . . . things have been . . ."

Blundell's hand closed quickly over the case in his pocket. He shifted his feet nervously and gave a cough.

"Alice," he said, "as an old friend . . . if I might be allowed . . ."

"Oh, Mr. Blundell . . ."

"*Please*," he said.

He turned his back upon her and laid a £20 note upon the little box. Then he took up his hat, and stood in front of the little girl with whom he had fancied himself years ago to be in love for ever.

He raised the tired hand to his lips, kissed it, and fumbled his way down the creaking stairs through a mist of tears.

CHAPTER VII

WITH his anti-breakfast cup of tea Blundell found a letter from his wife.

“DARLING OLD BOY” (it read),—“Welcome, a thousand welcomes. I have no words to tell you how disappointed I was to get your telegram. I’m afraid I shall be obliged to cry myself to sleep to-night. But of course business must be attended to, mustn’t it? Bother business! I want you to find this little note when you wake, so if I wish to catch the early post I must fly with it to the post office. But I have just time to say what you already know—that I love you more than ever, and just long to see you with all my might.—Your own
“BETTY.

“Wire your train in any case, sweetheart.”

Blundell kissed the little note several times, and repeated to himself, a pleasant warmth pervading him: “Dear little Betty, how she loves me, how

she loves me! I'll get a red tie, I think. Milly likes me in a red tie."

With the unaccustomed hum of London in his ears, Blundell tumbled impatiently out of bed, eager not to waste time. He got into his dressing-gown and slippers, but before going along the corridor to the bathroom he did his hair carefully, with wet brushes, taking immense pains to get a parting in the centre of his head. No decently-trained man ever allows himself to be seen with rumpled hair.

He found the bath ready for him, and as he lay in the hot water with the cold tap turned on, he remembered, with some annoyance, that he had parted, in a moment of natural emotion, with twenty of his hard-earned sovereigns in the early hours of the morning. With some of it—a sovereign, perhaps two—he had intended to buy some pretty little silver thing for Betty at Aspray's, a silver-bound note-book to hang on her chatelaine, or a silver pencil—at any rate, something to mark the importance of his return, and to let her see how dearly he loved her. With some of the rest—eight or nine sovereigns, perhaps—he had made up his mind to get for himself a few quite necessary things—pipes, a couple of boxes

of cigars, a few hundred cigarettes, some ties and socks—not Odoesque, but nearly—and so on.

Sentimentality, or, as he put it, chivalry, rendered such purchases impossible, or rather it rendered the gift impossible. The other things were essential.

He was not in the best of tempers when he returned to his bedroom. Having started the day badly, the tactics of his stud—next to a woman the most unnecessarily elusive institution on earth—didn't improve his temper. As he groped about under the dressing-table for it his curses were picturesque and ingenious, and when, after a quarter of an hour's hunt on his hands and knees, it rolled out of the bottom of his trousers with a grin, they became positively phosphorescent.

At breakfast his eggs were hard-boiled and his coffee distinctly muddy. At the next table an American, with a more than usually horrid accent, read his mail aloud to his wife, and with blatant exultation announced to the whole world that, by the sale of certain shares, he was the richer by several hundred thousand dollars.

Finally, the waiter upset the milk over the table, and Blundell, knowing that he would have paid a proportion of the ground-rent of the hotel for a year:

when he settled for the breakfast he had not eaten, rose, threw a string of poop-oaths at the German's head, and stumped angrily down-stairs to the smoking-room.

It was half-past nine. It was necessary to kill three hours and a half. Blundell felt no desire to leave the hotel. London was no longer in his blood. It was all too hopelessly lonely. No man who has been a somebody can stomach being a nonentity, an atom. He loathed the place, its crowd, its din, its smells, its ugliness.

With an air of aggression he lit a pipe and collected all the morning papers upon which he could lay his hands. The first one, a halfpenny paper, made him scoff loudly. It was composed of blood tabloids, and snippets of snobbery, badly-worded letters from readers about such trivial matters as the Post Office, the linnet that sang at midnight, and the methods of an effete Government, and a leader, obviously written by a precocious provincial journalist, on a subject that it was impertinent of him to discuss. The only thing in it that arrested his attention was a notice of a play by a leading playwright which had been produced the previous night at a leading West End theatre. The writer devoted the whole of his space to proving how much better he could have

written the play himself, and mentioned in his last line that it was only saved from being hissed off the stage by the actors.

For the fun of the thing, Blundell read the notices in all the other papers, and was amused to see that none of them agreed with the halfpenny writer, or with anybody else. A big daily, in devoting two columns to exuberant eulogies of the play, mentioned that, alas! it was almost wrecked by the acting. A third paper stated, sweepingly, that both the play and the acting were beneath contempt.

As time went on Blundell's anger and wounded pride slipped away, and a kind of excitement took their place. He began to finger his tie and ask himself again and again what on earth Milly could possibly want to see him about.

"Women are such extraordinary people," he said to himself, "they never forget. Their minds are like the boxes that children keep under lock and key, filled with the utterly unessential things. They will lose their engagement-ring in which there are three fairly respectable stones with very little regret. But they wouldn't part with a rose given to them by some disreputable lover for a thousand diamonds. . . . Those were jolly days, by Gad! What an unholy cad Cator was! I suppose if I hadn't

sympathised somebody else would have done so. What a near, thing it was that night at the Grosvenor. She was always dashed punctual, and as usual I hadn't arrived. And when she asked for me the Gov'nor came down! By Jove, how we scuttled! Good old Milly! She's got that incident stuffed away in her box, I'll bet a pony. . . . Why the dickens does she want to see me? . . . I suppose I ought to catch the train down to Betty to-night? Otherwise I'd suggest taking Milly to a theatre. I'd like to do a theatre with her again—just for auld lang syne. Oh, well, I must do my hair again, I suppose."

CHAPTER VIII

BLUNDELL walked as far as Hyde Park Corner. London was wearing its usual midsummer appearance. The sun poured down upon Piccadilly. Motor 'buses, with their offensive smell and horrid rattle, made their way up the hill. Cabs, empty, and likely to remain so, crawled, like tired flies, close to the kerb, wearing holland covers, with fringes hanging over the front. Most of the clubs were closed for new decorations.

Americans with padded shoulders, carrying kodaks, hurried along, taking quick, eager glances at the places of any interest. And the man whose business or profession demanded his presence, went about his work in a straw hat, minus waistcoat.

At Hyde Park Corner, Blundell got into a cab and drove to his flat in Addison Road. A few actors ambled about the Row on safe hacks, uneasily, and the dried grass in Kensington Gardens was spotted with the white frocks of nurse-maids and children.

Parliament had just risen, and London, more crowded than ever, was in that deplorable state that is known as "empty."

Almost every shop in that strange, giddy and dangerous thoroughfare, Kensington High Street, was undergoing its Annual Summer Sale, and hosts of women of all ages crowded round them, peering knowingly at the windows.

Hammersmith sent its contingent ; and West Kensington, poor but proud ; Chelsea, and the lost regions on the wrong side of the water. Even to Blundell there was a subtle pathos in the sight. He knew also the difficulty of keeping up appearances with very little to do it on.

His heart beat more quickly as he neared Uxbridge Mansions, Addison Gardens. He could remember the glow of pride which spread over him when he drove up to them with Betty, after their honeymoon. Their windows were small, but the bricks were red and the bells were electric, and the board in the hall contained one Honourable and one Surgeon-General.

Betty had thought everything very charming, and he remembered, with a laugh, that she put merely Uxbridge Mansions, W., on her note-paper, and left Addison Gardens, Hammersmith, out. It didn't do

away with the fact that it was a bare three-shilling cab fare from the theatres.

They had been very happy there together for three months. His mother, who didn't get on particularly well with Betty, and her mother, who didn't get on particularly well with him, had both stayed there at different times. Ah, those were golden days!

The flat was on the third floor. There was a new porter in the old porter's clothes. He knew this by the sack under his arms, and by the trousers, which, although they were turned up, were still too long by a couple of inches.

He instinctively felt for his latchkey. It seemed absurd to ring the bell of his own place like any stranger.

He asked for Mrs. Cator, and was shown into the little drawing-room in which he had taken such a pride. He stood on the rug in front of the fireplace—it was a bargain from one of Hampton's sales—and surveyed the room. His thoughts flew back to the morning, several days before his marriage, when, with dear old Fawcett, he had hung the pictures, pipe in mouth, coat off, sleeves rolled up, and had arranged the furniture—which Betty had afterwards rearranged in the usual woman's way.

One of the pictures was crooked. With a lump of sentimentality in his throat, he crossed the room and put it straight with the tip of his finger. The thin-legged writing-desk that he had given to Betty on her birthday—the first birthday, so far as he was concerned—was open. Many of Mrs. Cator's letters were lying upon it. In a pigeon-hole he saw a number of letters in his wife's handwriting. He took them up then and kissed them. Hearing a step in the passage, he slipped them, with a smile, into his pocket, and turned expectantly towards the door.

Milly Cator came forward with outstretched hand.

"Evelyn," she said, with a ring of pleasure in her honest voice, "how nice to see you again."

Slightly chilled at the almost sisterly greeting, Blundell took her hand. "Thanks," he said. "It is good to be home."

He had rehearsed a very different scene. He quite expected that she would have flung her arms round his neck with tears, and he had intended to kiss her on her cheek, and pat her shoulder, and talk in a fatherly way of what might have been.

As it was, Milly stood before him beaming with health and cheerfulness. Almost aggressively sane. He felt aggrieved. He felt as most of us feel when,

upon opening a smartly-got-up parcel, tied carefully, sealed here and there, and marked "Fragile," "With care," a sample of patent medicines is discovered.

"How well and brown you are looking, dear old boy," said Milly, sitting down. "You've evidently had a very good time."

Blundell assumed a woebegone expression.

"Does a man usually have a good time when he is away from the woman he loves better than his life for three years—only three months married? I've had a beastly time, thanks."

Mrs. Cator's face flushed slightly, and her thoughts flew uneasily to the pigeon-hole of the writing-desk.

"Oh," she said, "yes, yes, of course. I forgot Betty for a moment."

"I have never forgotten Betty for an instant," said Blundell. "When a man marries for love, you know, penal servitude is not worse than separation."

There was a slight pause. Mrs. Cator, unable to clear her mind of some gladness that the man whom she had expected to wait for her freedom should have married a woman so unworthy as Betty, wondered what he would say if he could see the bundle of letters.

Blundell, not altogether with intention, began to frame sentences likely to give pain to the woman

who seemed to have forgotten that he had behaved badly to her.

The temptation to put the letters in Blundell's hands, and so, while killing his love for his wife, very possibly regain some of it herself, was very strong. Being the man for whom she had sacrificed something more than her self-respect, Mrs. Cator still loved Blundell. It is the way of women.

"You'll stay to lunch, of course," she said brightly.

"I can't, thanks very much," said Blundell, who had made arrangements to do so, "I want to catch the afternoon train into the country. You see if I hadn't . . . if you hadn't. . . . I should have gone down last night, only that I wanted to be of use to you."

Mrs. Cator fidgeted with her fingers.

"It was kind of you to wait," she said. "The fact is, Betty wanted me to see you to get you to take down a parcel—quite a small one—of things I have been getting for her in town. As you are in such a hurry, perhaps I had better get it for you at once."

"Thanks," said Blundell, rising and opening the door.

Again Mrs. Cator's thoughts travelled in the direction of the pigeon-hole. After a brief, sharp struggle, the best that was in her won—there was

very little that was not best—and she rose with a smile and went to the door.

“How glad she will be to get you back again,” she said, as she went out.

Blundell returned to the rug in front of the fireplace, in an extremely irritable frame of mind. For Milly's sake he had stayed one night away from his wife, had been put to the expense of an hotel bill, extra cab fares, and had thrown away £20 of his hard-earned money from purely mistaken ideas of philanthropy.

“And we might have had such a jolly afternoon and evening,” he said to himself.

In the little dining-room of the flat, Mrs. Cator, with the tears streaming down her cheeks, spread out a telegram that she had received the previous morning. It was from Betty.

“Wire to Evelyn and ask him to see you to-morrow urgently. I do not want him down to-night or to-morrow. Keep him. Very important. Be sure you wire me the train he decides to come by.”

With a bitter exclamation Mrs. Cator opened the Railway Guide, and then drew a telegraph-form from its case.

"He is leaving by the 2.55—Milly," she wrote.

This she gave to her maid with the request that it might be sent at once. She then went to her bedroom, made a parcel of the hair-nets for which Betty had written, carefully bathed her eyes with a sponge, and returned, studiously cheerful, to the drawing-room.

"Here it is," she said, holding out the parcel. "Are you sure you haven't time to stay to lunch?"

"Quite sure, thanks," said Blundell. "I must get back to the Métropole and put my things together. Glad to see you looking so well and happy."

"Oh," said Mrs. Cator, "I never was happier in my life, or so well. Perhaps I shall see something of you both before your leave is up."

"Thanks. I hope so. . . . Well . . . good-bye."

"Well, good-bye."

As the outer door closed upon him Mrs. Cator slipped into a chair, with her hands over her eyes. "He's forgotten," she cried.

Blundell put up his stick to a cab, flung the little parcel upon the seat, got in after it, and slammed the doors together angrily.

"She's forgotten," he thought.

CHAPTER IX

IT was half-past one when Blundell got back to the Métropole. He made out that he had three quarters of an hour in which to get packed and pay his bill, and make some kind of a lunch. Lunch was the most important. He could pack and settle up in a quarter of an hour. So, not caring to face Birmingham, Manchester, and Chicago, he eschewed the dining-room, and went down to the bar, which was in an angle of the smoking-room.

By this time, by the careful application of make-believe upon the sore part, the sting of disappointment caused by Mrs. Cator's normal reception had been replaced by a glow of virtue. He had argued himself, without much trouble, into the belief that he had let Milly see, pretty plainly, that he, at any rate, had completely wiped the past out of his mind, for Betty's sake.

"I did it rather well," he said to himself, as he washed his hands. "If I had let myself go the slightest bit, or sentimentalised even for a minute,

there might have been complications. It was only by preserving a strenuously commonplace and ordinary manner and expression that I saved the situation. Poor, dear old Milly, how obviously she was suffering. It was dashed cruel, but being married, and frightfully in love with my wife, what else, as a man of honour, could I do possibly? I might perhaps have been a trifle kinder. It was rubbing it in rather. But after all, it was best for her, poor dear. There she is, jogging along fairly well, trying to live it down and all that. I should hate to have opened up the old wound."

Dipping the brushes in the water, he redid his hair with the utmost care, and examined his face in the glass minutely. He was pleased with what he saw, on the whole. He was a little troubled to find that his jaw-line was not so clean as it had been before he had left London three years ago.

"This rotten glass," he thought. "However, I must put in some ecca down in the country. Perhaps that farmer man of whom Betty wrote can lend me a mount, and I daresay the local padre will give me some tennis. Of course, if the worst comes to the worst, I must get Betty to come for some stiff tramps. She dislikes walking,

dear little girl, but she'll do anything for me. I should loathe to get fat."

With a head as shiny and flat as the back of a seal, Blundell left the wash-and-brush-up place, and passed into the bar.

A very smart young person, wearing a blouse transparent at the neck, with sleeves cut short above the elbow, was sitting behind the counter, reading a novel. She glanced haughtily and with a touch of insolence at Blundell, without, as a matter of fact, wishing to convey either the one or the other. She had been told, by one of her regular customers, that she was exactly like Zoe Dane, who always played duchesses in musical pieces, and she religiously copied that young woman's expression.

Blundell felt mildly amused. He hatted the barmaid in his best manner.

"May I venture to ask you to be so kind as to provide me with some of your excellent shrimp sandwiches and a brandy-and-soda?" he asked.

The young woman's mouth became unsteady. She did not permit it to break into a smile. Her prototype never smiled. In that, at least, she was different from every other person of her sex upon the musical comedy stage—smiling and sitting to photographers in indelicate costumes being the

only two talents required of "artistes" in that class of entertainment.

She rose languidly from her chair.

"Certainly," she replied. "But do you think you're old enough for a brandy-and-soda?"

Blundell laughed. "Ah, ha! a wit, a wit," he said.

With a natural playfulness that occasionally got the better of her pose, she fired the soda-water cork at him.

"An outer," said Blundell, rubbing his ear. "You didn't allow for the wind kicked up by that electric fan. Have another shot."

She put his glass on the marble-topped counter and expertly caught up three sandwiches with a silver instrument. These she placed upon a plate stamped with the crest of the hotel—it did not belong to the Gordon family—and dropped a piece of parsley by the side of them. She then returned to her chair and her novel.

Blundell, who felt more at home with women of her class than with women of his own, studied her carefully as he ate his lunch. She wore her clothes well, but like every Englishwoman, was unable to wear short sleeves in daylight without looking vulgar. It is a fashion that was created

in Paris. As everybody knows, every Frenchwoman is born wearing a pair of gloves.

"A jolly little bar this," said Blundell brightly.

"Yes?" The little girl did not take her eyes away from her book.

"What sort of people generally come here?"

"All sorts," she replied, with a drawl. "But mostly men who are known to the p'leece as 'on the market.'"

"On the market?" asked Blundell. "What's that?"

"Oh," she said, assuming boredom extremely well, "the term is applied to men of good family who haven't any money and who never pay, but who live like fighting cocks at other people's expense."

"Are there many of 'em in London?"

The girl looked at Blundell curiously.

"Hundreds," she replied. "They are mostly young, with double-barrelled names, and the only work they ever do is to polish up their hyphens. The men they go about with are younger than themselves. When they are no longer useful they are no longer young, although only a fortnight older, perhaps. Two of the best-known O.T.M.'s in town lived here for six months. On

condition that they left and never came back, the Manager let them off the whole of the money they owed him."

"Where did they go then?"

"Well, they were eighteen months in this street altogether without paying a shilling. There are two other hotels, you see."

"But, good heavens! why aren't they proceeded against?"

"Because," replied the girl, whose knowledge of humanity was even greater than her knowledge of liquors, "no one cares to be made to look foolish in the police reports."

Blundell was interested. "You get to know men pretty well in this profession, I suppose?" he asked.

"Business," said the girl sharply, "not profession."

"I beg your pardon."

"Well, rather, what do you think? From the way they treat me I can very nearly always tell where they were brought up."

"Really? By Jove!"

The girl made a book-marker of a theatre-card and turned towards Blundell with an air of almost royal condescension.

"Yes," she said, "and you'd be surprised how many men who would be described as of no

occupation, or as heirs to peerages, in the police courts are the worst bounders of all. They think that because a lady 'as . . . has to earn a living by standing behind a bar she may be a target for their coarse jokes and familiar leers. The feller I hate more than most is the one who belongs to the pussy class, *you* know what I mean—the unwashed, gaudily-dressed, long-haired, effeminate *creature* who makes eyes and throws darts. . . .”

“Throws darts?” echoed Blundell.

“I mean, puts the tip of his forefinger on the tip of his thumb and wriggles. Grrh! He's a horror. London's full of him. Heaps of 'em 'walk on' at the theatre and talk Art with a capital H. They call one another pet names and wear bangles, and are horribly pleased if anyone calls them decadent.”

“The lethal chamber is their place,” said Blundell.

“You're right,” replied the girl. “Then there's the cricketer in the pavilion—the man who talks nothing but cricket and never plays. He comes in wearing the M.C.C. colours round his straw and bowls imaginary balls at me and asks me, so that the whole place may hear, whether ‘Bosanquet's been in lately?’ and when did I ‘see Charlie Fry

last?' He's never spoken to either of 'em in his life."

"I suppose not," said Blundell, with a laugh.

"And then there's the old person with creaking joints and skinny neck and skin-tight clothes and the miraculous old top-hat balanced on one ear, a continual advertisement for salad-oil, who tells me 'that the service is goin' to the dorgs, be Gad!' Poor old thing, I'm always beastly sorry for him. He calls himself Major, and is no more entitled to it than that old screecher with the long beard is to call himself 'Doctor.' I forget his name, but he's the star turn of the Radical papers."

"I know the creature you mean," said Blundell.

He didn't, but he was anxious to draw the girl out. Her Cockney shrewdness amused him very much.

"The 'Varsity man is healthier than these others, but he's always ragging — wetting the matches, putting the whisky label on the brandy decanter. Oh, and you know — generally playing the goat. It all gives me work to do. The only good thing about him is that he never makes suggestive remarks, and that's something to be thankful for, I can tell you. . . . I can't quite make *you* out," she said, looking at Blundell quizzingly.

"No?" said Blundell, with a self-conscious laugh. "Have a shot."

"Well, you're a bit difficult to place. You've got the face of a Londoner with the mind of a countryman, and you haven't said anything about yourself although you've been here fifteen minutes; I should think that you're a man who began by being a gentleman and drifted into a commercial traveller, or else the son of a farmer who's been round the world and has gradually become a gentleman."

Blundell was not quite sure whether to be pleased or not. He blushed under the girl's direct gaze and laughed a little too loudly.

"I'm a sailor," he said.

"Ah!" said the girl. "That accounts for it. Fresh air and a fine example have coated over your boulderism."

"Draw it mild," cried Blundell.

"I don't keep draught beer," said the girl quietly. She still looked straight at Blundell. "The time to find out exactly the kind of man you are," she continued, undaunted, "would be to see you when you've had a drop too much, or when you are in a frightful rage. I'll make a bet you're a bit raw on those occasions. Am I right?"

Blundell retained a fixed smile and an undisturbed

appearance. Inwardly he devoutly hoped that the girl might come to a most horrid ending.

"By Jove! I must fly," he said. "I'm catching the 2.50, and I haven't packed."

"Not shirty?" asked the girl, giving him change for a sovereign.

"Oh, good Lord, no."

"Liar," she said politely.

As a matter of fact, Blundell still had more than comfortable time on hand. He had beat a graceful retreat, feeling that discretion was the better part of valour. He lit a cigarette in his bedroom and opened his kit-bag.

Deep down in his boots, Blundell had a lurking suspicion that his whole morning had been far from successful. First Milly Cator and then that barmaid woman had trampled on his self-conceit. He caught up a shirt and flung it irritably into the bag. He caught sight of himself in the glass and thought that his collar looked "rotten." He removed it savagely, and threw it with an oath into the empty fireplace. His coat felt tight under the arms. He slipped out of it and pitched it on to the bed. The packet of letters fell to the floor.

"Ah!" he thought, "Betty's letters. By Jove! I didn't mean to bring them away. I'm jolly glad

I have, though. It'll do me good to read the sweet, fresh outpourings of a woman who isn't a wrong 'un, like Milly and that little cat downstairs. . . . Yes, I'll dip into one. At least I shall know that *one* woman doesn't think I'm a hopeless outsider."

He sat down on the edge of the bed, and untied the riband that bound up the bundle. The letters were arranged in order. With an indulgent smile Blundell took the first one out of its envelope.

CHAPTER X

BLUNDELL rose from the chair by the window of his bedroom in the Métropole. Big Ben struck nine. His bags lay open, and his clothes and shirts lay scattered about the room. He had stopped in the middle of his packing to read Betty's letters to her friend.

As he read—tea unthought of, dinner unthought of—the veins of anger, disgust, contempt, and self-pity stood out in knots upon his forehead. The references to himself wounded him far more terribly than the indiscreet analysis of her horrid habits. This only made him feel righteously indignant, although it elevated him in his own eyes into the position of a man of high morality and unimpeachable rectitude.

Cramped and tired, he rose from his chair by the window, being unable to see. The light had faded.

For some time he stood in the little, stiffly-furnished room in the dark. He knew that he had

arrived at the end of a road which branched off in the shape of a Y into two others. Along one of these he could see himself and Betty together, yet alone. Along the other there was no Betty to be seen.

It was a big moment. Determined to make the most of it, even although the shock of disillusionment gave him exquisite pain, he indulged in the pleasure of standing outside himself, and looking at himself with the eyes of a friend—a friend who understood.

Instead of the selfish, sensual, commonplace, sentimental, easy-going person he was, he saw a good-looking, even handsome man, white all through, bleeding from a deep wound in his heart—a wound inflicted by the wife to whom he was so devoted, and had loved so faithfully; a wound no human hand could ever mend.

From the street beneath a quick, metallic echo of hoofs came nearer and died away, followed immediately by others. The sound of trains, an ugly sound, came also. In the passage outside his door, bells rang, and sometimes a key was pushed into the lock of other doors. Steps passed and repassed, muffled by the thick carpet.

"My God!" he cried aloud, "what have I done to deserve this—what, what? I have never quite lied to her, even if I haven't told her all the truth. She has lied to me from the beginning of all things. I have never been actually unfaithful to her; I've only been badly tempted, and have fallen. She has been worse than unfaithful to me for three years. She is leading a life a thousand times more immoral than that poor devil of a girl from the tobacconist's shop."

With a sudden movement he switched on the electric light, drew his chair beneath it, and with blasphemy on his lips and a desire to punish in his heart, continued to read.

CHAPTER XI

"I SLEPT the greater part of the afternoon away," the next letter ran. "If nothing exciting is going forward, I always lay myself out for an afternoon's sleep. It is a sure way to prevent lines. When I say sleep, I don't mean a nap outside the bed. That is really of little use. I mean a long, steady sleep from lunch till tea-time, in bed, undressed as though it were night-time, with the blinds down, the window open, and the air playing on my face.

"If women only knew it, this kind of sleep taken regularly every day, all through the year, is a great aid to keeping young—perhaps the best. There would be no need to indulge in rest-cures if women followed my example, nor face massage, nor electric treatment, nor for any of the new-fangled processes one hears so much about—and which are so expensive.

"That's one of the great disadvantages of being a mother. Unless the exchequer allows of an

excellent nursery, far away at the other end of the house, a woman cannot get her proper sleep. I thank Heaven that I am not a mother. I think a child would completely ruin my life. I have nothing of the maternal instinct. I never could stand a doll. One Christmas morning I remember being so angry because father, who thought, I suppose, that all children were the same, or didn't think, put a doll on my pillow, dressed to the nines. I had hoped for a book—a book of adventures by flood and field—'Ivanhoe' was the dream of my young life—and with a yell of disgust and repugnance, I caught up the pink-and-white thing, and flung it head first against the wall. Its smiling face cracked in half, and an arm fell off.

"I wonder if I should have done the same thing to a child if I had found it on my pillow. I really believe I should.

"But take the little girl in this cottage. There you have a born mother. Nature marked her out for a mother from her earliest infancy. She will be one of those women who thinks no more of having a child once a year than I think of having the *World* every Tuesday morning. It comes to this. I am utterly devoid of the primeval form of passion. I

dislike it. It simply doesn't interest me. I don't understand it. Indeed, I go further than that. If it hadn't been the only possible means of my getting out of the half-pay atmosphere of home, nothing on earth would have induced me to marry—especially the kind of man Evelyn is. You know Evelyn slightly, and therefore, no doubt, you think that he is a most excellent specimen of English manhood. I daresay you are right. In fact, I am sure you are. He is an excellent specimen of English manhood, or any other manhood for that matter. I can well imagine that he would make a very useful kind of neighbour. If one flattered him sufficiently he would run one's little messages, roll one's lawn, take one's dog for walks, and make a cheerful and fairly efficient fourth at a game of Bridge.

“But he is not the ideal man to be married to, believe me. He takes everything as a matter of course, and having got it either sleeps or goes his way, whistling ‘Annie Laurie,’ or an air from the latest musical play—musical comedy—what do they call those things? He wants his own way in everything, and nags when he doesn't get it. He demands a constant supply of good food, and grows horribly sulky and bad-tempered unless his vanity is fed at

stated times also. He plays a good deal more enthusiastically than he works, and being utterly devoid of a sense of humour, puts the wrong interpretation on badinage. And the worst of it is, I still live in an atmosphere of small means. Making both ends meet is not a pastime I care about. My *métier* is spinsterhood with unlimited money. I ought to travel, and see the world. You see, unlike most women, I am intelligent, and therefore quite out of the common. Everyone has a kink. You know mine. I revel in it. But for all that, I am very capable of enjoying anything that is lofty. I feel that I could write books if I took the trouble. I should write about myself, of course. Most women do, one way or another. And because I can't be bothered to write books, I write these long, indiscreet letters to you. It's very unwise. But you see I can't very well write them to my mother or to Evelyn. My mother would be interested and horror-stricken; and I think Evelyn would hurt me. I think he would rise up with superb righteousness and hit me. You see, he is so essentially English. He considers that being a man he may be as unfaithful as he chooses, but that no wife has a right to be anything but a devoted idiot. It's a fine theory.

"Not, my dear Milly that I ever want to be unfaithful, but if I did, I should, if only to feel that justice was being done.

"I put in an excellent time this evening. My hero and I met again. You will never guess where. I didn't mind a bit what the good woman downstairs might think, and so I asked him in after dinner. He came about nine o'clock. It was a gorgeous evening. Very hot and still and breathless. Just the kind of evening that helps me immensely.

"I put the lamp out—a thing that smokes if you turn it too high, and smells if you turn it too low—and brought in three candles from the bedroom. I have no stupid superstitions on the subject of three lights. I really think this caused the good woman more uneasiness than the fact that I was going to entertain a mere farmer. The impropriety part of it didn't appeal to her in the least. For me—a 'London lady'—to have any truck with a country person was the point. I told her I wanted to ask him about his crops.

"I wore a soft white, clinging thing—a cross between a tea-gown and a night-dress, cut low at the neck, with short sleeves. I was discovered lying on the sofa, under the window.

"He came in timidly. His mood had changed again. He was no longer just the delighted boy, or the man roused. He was the man in love. A man in love is always seen to the worst advantage. He sits in awkward positions, and is quiet, dull, and sentimental. My monster was exactly like them all. I thought till this evening that it was impossible for him to look awkward. I was wrong. He not only looked more awkward than most men in love—he looked more foolish.

"And yet he was not uninteresting, because it was so palpably his first attack. I read to him for an hour. I chose Rossetti—not Dante Gabriel. His work is so mad, so tricky, so utterly unmeaning. But Christina. I read well for a woman. I understand the value of a semicolon. And as I read, he sat and watched the movement of my lips. He hung on the sound of my voice without listening to the words, and I might just as well have been reading the sorriest prose. I read because I had pretty well exhausted all topics of conversation.

"When I looked at him—I looked at him frequently—I could see a blaze in his eyes. I believed that if I had put my hand on his, he would have seized me and kissed my breath away. I longed to do it. I

longed, just as a child does when it is alone with a fire, to throw on a log and see the flare. It required only the faintest movements to affect him. I had only to move from my back to my side, facing him slowly like a cat, to see him tremble suddenly. I want you to understand that he is deeply ashamed of any feeling of passion. I can always see him struggling against it. You see, he has elevated me to the pedestal of a saint. I am no woman. I am a goddess! All men who love for the first time—all men of imagination, all unconscious poets—do this. Being just a woman, I like it, naturally. So would you. So you did, and very likely do. Every Jill has her Jack, they say. But I believe the worshipper has the best time—until he has got all he wants, and so ceases to worship. And even then it is the one who was worshipped who has the worst time. It is always the woman who pays.

“You can understand—knowing that he is one of those imaginative, poetic people who like to think of women as filmy things, who shudder to see them eat and drink, and grow almost apoplectic at the sight of a red-faced, untidy-headed hockey girl—how gently, how subtly I had to set to work. But I succeeded admirably, against his will, utterly against

his will, and I saw him dig his nails into his hands several times. Poor lad! how he will loathe himself for it when he goes home. He would shoot anybody who told him I was the hard-thinking cause of it.

"He bent over my hand when he was going, and kissed it lightly, with the simple grace and adoration of a school-boy, and then rushed helter-skelter away.

"I took the candles into my bedroom, and undressed slowly. Honestly and truly, this man is the only one I have ever met who has come near to stirring what little power for loving there is in my heart. If I were endowed, or cursed, whichever you like, with the maternal instinct, I should be as much in love with John Ashley as John Ashley is in love with me. As it is, he makes me rather ashamed of myself. He is such a genuine soul. Indeed, he is a man at his best. I feel at this moment that I should like to go to the bank of some river, swim across it and back, and come out cleansed, just as much woman as he is man.

"Together equally genuine, equally simple, equally human, equally in love, what a heaven would earth be for us. I can't help thinking sometimes that a woman misses something that is utterly sweet who does not bring a

child into the world. Is she merely a bud until then? Is it that which causes her to break into blossom? There is a minor note reverberating horribly sadly through my body to-night. I feel like a beautiful bell without a tongue. I cannot sound a true, quivering note. I am minus the one essential that goes to make a woman utterly womanly.

"I think this is the only time in my life that I have wished painfully, with a sharp, hot pricking, that I could go back and begin all over again. I would be different. I would try so hard to be clean. God! how I would try!

"I wonder whether, if I could go back, it would be any good. I am afraid not. As I am, so was I brought into the world. I think, with the feeling of that man's honest eyes burning my cheeks deliciously, that I would rather be ugly and womanly, than beautiful and . . .

"What's that? I believe I can hear him under the window of my sitting-room. I must go and see."

CHAPTER XII

"I CREPT across the creaking room gingerly, because my feet were bare; gathered my night-gown close, shook my hair away from my face, and peeped behind the curtain.

"The window was open. The moon was sitting in a sky as clear as water, flooding the earth with her light, surrounded by a thousand thousand stars. I could count the loose stones on the road. I could see every sleepy ear of corn to the right and left, and far in front of me. I could see every leaf in every tree lying still in sleep against the deep blue of the sky. They threw their shadows in front of them as though the sun and not the moon were shining. It was all quite still. I had a feeling that it would be unkind not to hold my breath in case it should wake up everything. The beauty, the simplicity, the trustfulness of it all made me forget for a moment what brought me to the window.

"I heard a long sigh and a crunching sound. I leant slightly forward. There stood the man I wished I could love as no woman had ever loved a man before—leaning against a tree, looking up at my window. In a whisper the village clock struck one. Everything stirred slightly at the sound, murmured sleepily, and fell to sleep again.

"The moon shone directly into my window—staringly. I slipped from behind the curtain, and stood there in her light, with my hair all about my shoulders. I must have looked very, very charming.

"I saw him spring a step forward and stop. Across the stillness his breathing came to me—hot, quick, eager. My heart raced. I felt as I had never felt in my life—a child, a girl, an ordinary sweet girl.

"Neither of us moved. I heard the quarter strike. And then I said his name, faintly, once, twice, and again. With his arms held out in front of him, with his eyes fixed on my face, he came slowly, slowly, until he stood under my window. I leant over and looked down at him, with my heart fluttering in my mouth. I said his name again. And not like a man who knew what he was doing, he put his hands

among the branches of the thick creeper on the wall, and came up to me—nearer, nearer. And our faces were close together. Our breath mingled pantingly. He climbed a little higher, and put his leg over the window, sitting on the sill. We said nothing, but presently his hands were on my shoulders and I felt myself drawn forward. He held me tight, and kissed my lips, my eyes, my forehead, my hair, again and again and again. It was the sweetest thing that I had ever known. For just that little hour I felt nearer to being a woman than ever in my life. My arms were slipping round his neck when a bat flapped against my face. I gave a little cry of disgust, and drew back into the room, and my hands over my eyes. When I took them away I was alone. And then I flung myself upon my bed and cried myself to sleep."

CHAPTER XIII

"TO-DAY is the last of the days I had to kill. I woke to it refreshed and rested. The episode of the first hour of the morning came back to me at once. But the feeling which the air, the moonlight, the sentiment had given me had departed. It only struck me as intensely funny. I was Betty Blundell, *née* Trevor, again. I looked at myself standing in my night-gown and bare feet in the moonlight, allowing myself to be kissed by that dear, stupid boy, with astonishment. I laughed for minutes. But at the same time I had a lurking desire to thank my stars for the opportune arrival of that bat!

"He is a dear boy. I defy anybody to meet him and not feel a little tender about him. Goodness, how unwise it was.

"I found a letter from Evelyn waiting for me. He tells me that they will put in this morning about midday for certain. Ah, well, thank Heaven he will be going away quite soon again.

"I sent two wires by one of the children. I didn't want to see that inevitable smile flicker over that foolish woman's face at the post office. One was wifely and welcomed Evelyn. The other you know, and I trust you have long ago acted upon it. In fact, of course you have, for I received a telegram from Evelyn saying that he was putting up at the Métropole, and had business in London to-morrow. I wonder how well you knew him, my dear. I shall get you to tell me one of these days. He has often assured me, in his silly, sentimental way, that I am the only woman with whom he has ever been in love. I never believed him. I never believe anything of that kind that any man tells me, certainly not a man with reddish hair and fair skin.

"And so I shall have to-day and most of to-morrow to enjoy. I know to a comma what kind of a mood Evelyn is in. He has worked himself into a state of terrific remorse over the little unfaithfulnesses of the last three years. And he is saying to himself, with an air of great enjoyment and well-simulated sincerity: 'I am not worthy, I am not worthy.' And all the while he is pining to know what you want to see him about. What a shallow, sentimental, posing, self-indulgent pig he is

I can see him as I write this. (It is six o'clock, and I am getting this ready to post at seven, so that you may have it in the morning. It will be my last letter in regard to this episode.) He is getting a shirt out of his case, and is carefully examining it to see whether it is stiff enough, shiny enough to wear. He will dress himself carefully, wet his hair in his usual way, dine with a self-conscious smirk in a high collar, and go to a music hall with a big cigar. He will take more whisky and soda than is quite good for him during the evening, and either go back to his hotel in a sickly, silly way, or not, as the case may be.

"His letter prepares me for a very uncomfortable time. These last three years have, I can see, only enhanced his selfishness, his coarseness—what he calls his affection—and his bad temper. Well, I suppose I mustn't grumble; I married with my eyes open. It was the only way out.

"Just before lunch, I received another letter—a very different one. It was brought by a boy, and was unaddressed. It was to be given 'to the lady.' I'll copy it out. It is very funny:

"'I love you. I have loved you since the world

began. I can't live unless you are my wife. I want you, beloved. I have nothing to offer you but love. That's all, but it is the greatest love that man ever offered to a woman. You kissed me last night ; my lips are still trembling. Let me find you again on your hill, with the sun waiting behind you. I love you, and I have found you, after all.'

"I wish I could give you some idea of the writing—the great, honest, school-boy writing—that shakes with his eagerness. I wonder what he will say when I tell him that I am married, and that Evelyn arrives to-morrow.

"What do you think he will do? Will he hurt me do you think? I remember I had a horrid dream in which leaves played a great part. My recollection of it is very hazy, but didn't he go mad or something? But even wild boys don't do that these times. He will soon get over it, living as he does in the open air, and the incident will remain with him as pleasantly as it will with me.

"It's quite marvellous how quietly these days have gone. It seems a century ago that I used to sit and listen to Valentine Worthing. I am already fidgeting to get back to blessed London, and he

its murmur, and feel the pulse of it throbbing under my feet. What's a hansom look like? And how are they getting on with the Ritz Hotel? It gave promise of magnificent hideousness. And do the geraniums still hang outside the Berkeley? And is there any difference in the length of the skirt?

"Ten days? Oh, Milly, no, no. Ten solid years! My calendar lies to me. I am ten years older. I feel that everything in my dear London will be changed. Don't, don't tell me that it has changed. There were so many pieces at the theatres that I wanted to see. They will have been withdrawn ages ago, and forgotten. And new ones, with actors I never heard of, will have taken their places. I am sure my hair is streaked with grey. I shall be obliged, for the first time, to have it touched.

"I wish Evelyn would come. I wish I hadn't asked you to keep him in town another day. I no longer want anything to do with the farmer man. I want Evelyn. I want to wheedle him to leave this place and take me back to town. I want to be able to wake in the morning, and hear the rumble of 'buses, the jingle of cabs, the cries of paper boys. Bond Street is in my blood again. I ache for a sight of Bond Street.

"Hurry Evelyn away. Don't keep him. Make him come to me. I don't suppose you care two raps about him, whatever happened in the old days. Be a friend, and send him to fetch me away. This place is eerie. I can't hear a sound, and there's nowhere to go.

"But I suppose I must just tell you what happened. It wouldn't be fair, after all I have told you, would it? I waited till five o'clock. And then I went to the hill—that beastly hill—I hope for the last, last time. The boy, or man, or farmer was waiting there. The instant he caught sight of me a silly smile broke out round his mouth, and a damp look came into his eyes. He didn't come and meet me, and so save me the troubling of climbing to the top. He waited for me, looking more utterly foolish than any man I have ever seen.

"I was in no mood for girlishness. All desire to go on playing had faded. I wanted to get rid of him, and to think of London. To sit quietly, and try with my eyes shut to conjure up the sounds of London.

"He opened his arms as I came to the top, and stood there beaming. Half shy, half bold, wholly idiotic. 'Beloved!' he cried.

"I slipped aside quickly. 'My dear boy, don't please!' I said—I'm afraid rather unkindly. 'I've only just come to thank you very much for helping me to pass the time till my husband came home. It has all been very jolly, and I hope that if ever you come to London you will look us up. I am sure that my husband will be only too glad to . . .'

"I stopped because something in his eyes frightened me. He bent forward and looked at me for a moment, and his face lost all its colour. Then he tottered, swayed like a big tree struck by lightning, and to my immense surprise, fell flat on his face in the grass.

"I fled! It was most uncomfortable and unusual. Of course, it was unexpected for him; but what did he mean by being so quite too ridiculous?

"I must hurry up if I want to catch the post, and I do want to do so awfully. You will get this before you see Evelyn. Just make some excuse—give him those hair-nets you said you would send me and didn't, and pack him off by the afternoon train. But please send me a wire. Do this for me, Milly, like a dear, and count on me for a similar act of friendship at any future time."

CHAPTER XIV

THE following day was as hot in the country as it was in London. In London the heat was annoying. In the country it was a joy.

Mrs. Blundell sang as she dressed. It was a pretty, bird-like voice, very true, very light, very well tutored—utterly without feeling. She dressed carefully. It took her half an hour to decide which of her many frocks she should wear. She tried on one, and moved about the little cramped room in it. She took it off and tried on another. This she eventually discarded for the time, and went back for the first.

It was the white dress with baby ribbons. In slipping it over her head, one of the hooks caught in her hair-net. She fumbled patiently, deftly, with it for some moments, singing softly, and when the hook still refused to let go, she stamped, and cried sharply, "Damn everything that catches!"

She sang again when she had freed the hook by tearing her net.

Many times during breakfast she slipped to the window and looked out villagewards for the boy who brought telegrams and butter, bacon and soap, from the conglomerate post office. Each time she returned without having seen him she sighed impatiently, and broke into a smile.

Her appetite was excellent. She ate two new-laid eggs with the same swift daintiness which characterised everything she did. Once or twice she flung her arms up, threw her head back, and cried under her breath, "London, London!"

She was arranging flowers in three coloured vases, with glass legs, when there was a knock upon the door.

Mrs. Blundell turned eagerly. "Come," she said, dropping the flowers on the table.

Mrs. Weeks entered with a kind of deferential familiarity.

"Give me the telegram, Mrs. Weeks, quickly."

"Ther bean't no tallygum, 'm," said Mrs. Weeks, with a smile.

Mrs. Blundell's hand fell to her side. She flushed angrily. "Oh, well, what is it, Mrs. Weeks—what is it?"

"I jest thought as how, mabbe, ye'd finished

with your breakfus', 'm." The good and somewhat flustered woman's tone became apologetic.

Mrs. Blundell was too excited to be irritable for long together. She took up the flowers again and smiled pleasantly.

"Oh, yes, Mrs. Weeks, do. I expect my husband to-day."

"'Usband, 'm? Beggin' your pardon for the same, but I allays looked up to you as a widder, for which I'm sure I'm very sorry, being young as you are and in the prime of life and strength, and with lots of future and all."

Betty Blundell took a rosebud out of a vase and deftly opened its petals. "I've only been married three years and a half, Mrs. Weeks," she said.

"Indeed, 'm!"

In Mrs. Weeks's voice there was something of the interested sympathy which may always be noticed in the voices of women, whether they themselves are happily married or not, at the mention of the word husband. And she smiled warmly, and smirked a little, and sunk her voice a tone, romance oozing out of her every pore.

Mrs. Blundell smiled back prettily, describing the woman in her brain as a hopeless fool.

"You must give us a very nice dinner, dear Mrs. Weeks. You must surpass yourself."

Mrs. Weeks blushed with pleasure.

"Yes'm," she said. "'As 'e bin away fer long, 'm?"

"For three years."

"Moy, that's a fair slice."

"Yes; it *is* a long time."

"Tore away while the 'oneymoon was still young, as one may say." Mrs. Weeks picked up the end of her apron, and ran her fingers slowly along the edges. "Mabbe ye'll be leavin' me now, 'm?"

"Oh, dear, no, Mrs. Weeks," said Mrs. Blundell, with the emphatic insincerity of the woman whose one desire is to be liked by everybody. "I adore this little place and its surroundings. We shall only leave you if my husband's business takes him to London."

(London! London! The word echoed in her heart!)

"Thank you, 'm," said Mrs. Weeks.

A step crunched below. Like a swallow, Mrs. Blundell again darted to the window and looked out eagerly.

A throb of sympathy seized Mrs. Weeks, when she

saw the look of disappointment on Betty Blundell's face.

"Ah," she thought, packing the plates, "it must be foine to be loved loike that.

"Why the dickens doesn't he wire?" cried Mrs. Blundell inwardly. "The fool!"

"Might I make so bold as to arst if your gentleman is a horfcer, 'm, not for the sake o' pryin', I do assure you, 'm, to spread it around to them in this village who is allays on tiptoes for a bit o' noos, not bein' one o' them as is out of the way curious by nature, although I won't say as 'ow my 'cart is flinty, and takes no hinterest in feller-sinners—not, if you'll believe me, 'm, as 'ow I classes you and such as a sinner except in the Bible sense, which, as everyone knows, properly used and directed, only applies when it's unpleasant to the poor and needy, rightly regardin' gentlefolks with indulgence."

"No, Mrs. Weeks," said Betty, seizing her opportunity. "My husband is in the Navy."

"Ah'm," said Mrs. Weeks, who had regained her breath, "'e must be a darin' gentleman for to spend his life cooped up as one may say in four walls all gettin narrow at the bottom and flat on top, which 'as, I am told, an up and down movement that

affects the strongest when they least expect it, with nothing but a waste of water around, not that I've ever 'ad the good fortune to see it myself, but knows them as 'as, filled with strange animals and fishes such as I've seen on Mr. Creek's Christmas Calendar, 'im as is the baker 'ere, 'm, and a nice, simple feller when sober and in 'is right mind, but inclined to be adventurous when filled, 'avin' smashed up 'is 'ome three times, breakin', if you'll believe me, every blessed stick 'e could lay 'ands on, laughin' 'ighly amused the 'old of the time, same as a man might at a play; and why I speak of 'im before you, which I'm sorry for, and apologises, is because 'e were a sailor in a manner o' speakin', that is, 'e wore sailor's things at the Hearl's Court H'Exhibition up in Lunnon before 'e returned to 'is father an' said, 'Father, I 'ave sinned against Heaven and you, but I would as lief 'ave a nice roast chicken, not 'avin' a mind for fatted calf,' and gettin' it too. . . ."

"Yes," said Betty Blundell, marvelling at the woman's astonishing glibness. "A sailor has a lot to put up with. But he has his compensations when he gets to port."

"Ah," said Mrs. Weeks, "a nice beverage it is

too, 'm, and goes grandly to the 'ead. I 'ad some of it when I was young at a Baptist houtin', and I can assure you, 'm, that if it 'adn't been for the presence of the minister as 'ow there were nothink I wouldn't 'ave done, and thankful I were for the same, though 'is voice were momentous and 'e did 'ave to leave the village under a shadder, 'avin' tampered with a young girl and the club money, bein' seen and heard of again on a race-course, standin' on a tub in a white 'at. And so your 'usband is a-comin' back, and I do rejoice and I 'ope as 'ow you will stay as long as it suits you, bein' very useful to me, the extra shillin's, I can assure you, 'm, with a large family and all."

Mrs. Blundell rose and stood looking thoughtfully at her writing-case.

As Mrs. Weeks left the room Mrs. Blundell seized the time-table, and for the tenth time looked up the trains from London. (London! London!) One arrived at 3.45. It was the first, unless he changed and waited three-quarters of an hour at a junction half-way, in which case he would be . . .

She looked at her travelling clock. "No, he's missed it."

The second one came in at half-past seven. "Good

heavens!" she cried, "what a frightful time to kill. I do think Milly might have played the game. She got my letter this morning. What cats women are."

A hundred times during the remainder of the day, Mrs. Blundell sprang up from the hard, anti-macassared sofa, and went to the window. A hundred times she cried out: "Why doesn't he wire, why doesn't he come? Curse this place, curse it." A hundred times she took up a book, and allowing her thoughts to wander, conjured up the noises, the bustle, the undercurrent of London. (London! London!)

Mrs. Cator's telegram was handed to her in the afternoon. Betty Blundell rejoiced. But a restless still pervaded her. At seven o'clock, unable to sit still, to stand still, to read, to think, she started off to walk along the road which led to the station.

No telegram had come from Evelyn. The postman delivering the evening post had gone. There was no letter from Evelyn.

Telling herself that Evelyn was planning a surprise, Mrs. Blundell remained on the road till half-past eight, till nine, till half-past nine.

The sun went down in fiery silence. The harvest moon rose placidly. Birds chattered of their day's

doings, and one by one fell asleep. The faint breeze, which had been teasing the grasses, grew tired too. Even the gnats went home. Mrs. Blundell was alone.

The stillness got upon her nerves. With quick, angry steps, she returned to the cottage. Evelyn had missed the last train. The dinner had been laid some time. The heat of the lamp had made the flowers hang limp.

Mrs. Weeks had spent much time and thought in their arrangement. She had placed others on the mantel-board, in vases collected from her own Sunday sitting-room. Her daughter had placed a big bowl filled with sun-flowers on the dressing-table in the bedroom. With clean hands, the mother and her daughter had tidied up the room, packed the collection of books that Mrs. Blundell had brought with her in a little pile at the foot of the sofa, and tied the backs of the chairs up with clean antimacassars, trimmed with a staring blue ribbon.

The little table upon which Mrs. Blundell did her letter-writing had been the subject of their earnest thought also. The pens were arranged in parallel lines, the note-paper placed tidily on the blotting-

pad, the excellent writing-case—Blundell's birthday present—closed and fastened.

Mrs. Blundell came into the room and flung her hat on to the sofa. The books toppled over with a clatter. She crossed to the writing-table, dashed the pens here and there, disarranged the note-paper, and flung open the writing-case. Then snatching the flowers out of their vases, she pitched them out of the window. They lay trembling upon the road.

Mrs. Weeks tapped at the door.

"What is it?" cried Mrs. Blundell.

"If you please, 'm, dinner has bin cooked this hour. I'm afraid the chickenses is all frizzled up."

"I don't want any dinner," said Mrs. Blundell. "Go away."

Leaving the perspiring woman standing in the middle of the room with her mouth open, Mrs. Blundell went into the bedroom and slammed the door.

CHAPTER XV

EARLY in the morning, furiously angry, Mrs. Blundell sent a telegram to her husband and pre-paid the reply. What right had he to stay at the Métropole while she had to put up with two tiny, impossible rooms in an out-of-the-way hole in the country? It was unjust. It was ridiculous. She was only there, she argued, with dabs of angry colour on her cheeks, at his especial request. All this time she might have been in London, or near London, at any rate in civilisation, having a good time.

At midday a telegram and a note were brought up to her. The telegram was from Evelyn Blundell, the note from John Ashley.

"Coming some time to-day," ran the first.

The second contained these eleven words :

"Meet me on the hill this evening for the last time."

Anger left Mrs. Blundell. Determination took its

place—a determination to get Blundell to take her away to London, to Brighton, to Dieppe, anywhere away from the country, where there were people, things to dress for, things to see; a determination to make him pay for not having hurried to her side.

And she could make him pay, she said to herself, with a triumphant smile, in which there was not a little cruelty. She knew her husband well. She knew exactly the temper of him, the nature of him. Ah, yes, he should be made to pay.

She laughed as she thought about it, and as she laughed a song came back to her lips, and her eyes sparkled, and she moved about the room like a fairy, as slight, as exquisitely finished, as fresh and girlish as a Romney "Lady Hamilton."

She laughed a rippling laugh of amusement as she re-read John Ashley's little note. Yes, distinctly it would be good fun to see him again. After all, he was an unkissed man. He still existed as a subject for experiments, and it would be interesting to see what manner of mood he was in.

But she had plenty to do before the evening. Whether she ultimately decided on Brighton, Dieppe, Dinard, or London, dress was a difficulty. She would, she decided, run through her wardrobe,

and see how she stood—decide which dresses would pass muster as they were, which could be made to pass muster with a little manipulation, and which would have to be replaced.

She gave little thought to her outstanding bills at the dressmaker's. After all, Blundell couldn't expect to get everything for nothing. And so, in the best of spirits, she spent a large portion of the morning and afternoon trying on frocks, peering critically at them, patting them here and there, and making notes on a sheet of writing-paper.

And she sang the while, as a bird sings, and flung her arms up gaily at the thought of leaving the country she so heartily disliked. Like a child, she even stood and looked out at the magnificent panorama, spread in front of the window, and made a *moue* at it.

Yes, after all, she had put in a fairly good time, she thought. John Ashley was very new. He had given her some excellent fun. He had proved to her, almost too convincingly, the fact that she had lost none of her power.

The evening came, as evenings have a knack of doing. She had been longer over her dress parade than she had intended to be. Evelyn would be

in the cottage before she could return from the hill. It pleased her to think that he would be upset at not finding her waiting to give him welcome. She dawdled a little in giving directions to Mrs. Weeks as to dinner, and, for the same purpose, made her way quite slowly through the fields.

She had no eyes for the delicate beauty of the evening, for the rich colouring of the corn, for the splashes in the hedges, for the whispers of the shaking grass, for the loud cantata of the birds.

"Dinard, Dieppe, or London?" she asked herself over and over again. "Or London? It's a bad time of year for London, but there are the theatres, and there's the Exhibition—that huge patch of gravel and painted canvas, popular chocolates and popular bands. But *there*, there are people—people!"

She looked at her watch, resting one pretty foot on the lower step of a stile. By taking the cart in which she had driven, Evelyn would be already in the cottage. She laughed as she imagined his disappointed face, and wondered how long it would be before he commenced to blaspheme.

Against the sky, erect and very still, stood Ashley, arms folded, chin low, watching her gravely as she went up. The expression in his eyes was curiously cynical, curiously bitter.

With a kind of shock Mrs. Blundell noticed that the young look she had so admired in him had gone. There were lines about his eyes and mouth; a peculiar slope about his shoulders.

He made no movement as she came nearer. Bare-headed, there he stood, with a never-changing expression, like a man turned into a statue.

For the first time in her life Mrs. Blundell felt insignificant, commonplace. She felt small and ignoble by the side of this cold, impassive man, and all kinds of ridiculously feeble remarks fluttered through her mind.

"Good evening," she said finally, with a meaningless laugh, for which she hated herself. "What a beautiful evening."

John Ashley merely continued to look at her silently.

"We have certainly been very lucky in the weather," she added, after a most uneasy pause. "Your corn is very good, isn't it?"

Again she paused. Still Ashley remained silent, with his eyes going over her slowly.

She felt that he could see into her heart, and was aware of the emptiness of it—that he could see how poorly her nature compared with her

appearance. She could feel the blood flooding her face. She bent down and plucked some grass.

"You said you wanted to see me," she said. "I thought that you had always known that I was married. I've always worn my ring." She caught his eyes. She knew that he was aware that she was lying. "My husband will be waiting for me. I think I'd better be . . ."

"Stop!" he said quietly. "I have nothing to say, no reproaches to make. You have merely proved to me that my father knew what he was talking about. Before you go out of my life, will you kiss me once more?"

Immediately Mrs. Blundell became herself, and Ashley dwindled before her eyes.

"Oh, yes," she said; "but you must really be quick about it."

He opened his arms and put them round her. He drew her slowly towards him, looking down into her eyes. Slowly he bent his head. There was a gleam in his eyes; and as she looked at them her dream came back to her, and she felt his hands close round her throat. She tried to call out. She struggled wildly. He was killing her.

A coarse laugh rang through the quiet, scented air, and she found herself falling to the ground.

CHAPTER XVI

WHEN Betty Blundell came to herself, as she did quickly, the first thing she noticed was that her stockings looked quite charming against the green of the grass; the second that her husband and young John were standing straight up looking at one another quietly.

She sat up, and rubbed her elbow and straightened her frock and waited, with a sense of delight, for an outburst of blasphemy from her husband.

Her delight turned into anxiety. The silence, so totally unexpected, so absolutely out of place, became oppressive. She examined her husband's face curiously, and then shot a quick glance at Ashley's face.

There was none of the mutual hatred that she expected and hoped to see upon either face—only an expression of sympathy.

In the distance a sheep-bell tinkled, and the shrill voice of a boy frightening the crows away

drifted up. Among the branches of a neighbouring tree a linnet sang, and a bee, self-absorbed, one-purposed, hunted musically for a useful blossom.

At last Blundell spoke.

"Well," he said, "are you goin' to kill that dirty little woman, or isn't it worth your while?"

Ashley shook his head without a word. Then he stooped and picked up his hat, and Blundell watched the man who thought that he knew more than his father had known swing down the hill.

A sudden feeling of fright seized Betty Blundell. She scrambled to her knees, clasped her hands together, and cried out:

"Evelyn, Evelyn!" Again the coarse laugh rang out. "Evelyn, before God I have been faithful to you—before God, Evelyn!"

Blundell was not looking at her. He was watching Ashley.

The beautiful Betty Blundell crept through the grass and caught up her husband's hand.

With a shudder and a gesture of disgust Blundell shook her off. "Faithful!" he said. "Faithful?"

"Yes, yes."

He took out the bundle of letters and flung them in her face.

The veins stood out suddenly upon his forehead, and his face grew red.

"Get up," he said; "your stockings won't affect me. And when you've got nothing better to do, run through those letters. They'll amuse you. . . . I shall allow you a third of my pay through my solicitors. You know how 'precious much that is. But *you* won't starve, worse luck! It would be a d—n fine thing if you could! Your sort don't starve; but in order to live as you want to do, you'll be obliged to follow the oldest profession in the world like an honest woman, and no longer spend your life indulging in your amusin' hobby. You'll find at least one good woman among your new companions—very much too good for you. . . . Here's your first week's pay."

With a sneer on his face, Blundell dropped two sovereigns upon the grass at Betty's feet.

"Evelyn . . . Evelyn . . ." she cried, "as God's my judge . . ."

With a hoarse, inarticulate cry Blundell sprang at his wife and seized her by the shoulders. All his rage and grief and wounded vanity and self-pity were stirred, and they surged through his veins into his brain. Murder was in his blood—a red-

hot, fiendish, irresistible desire to hurt, to smash, to wound, to stamp upon the beautiful thing who had tricked and fooled him, whose life was a lie, whose touch was contamination, whose mind was warped and horrid and low. The good little bad woman had used the same expression in defending a lie. On her lips it had not sounded blasphemous. On the lips of *this* woman, *this* kind of woman . . .

Blundell shook her as a dog shakes a rat. His lip was curled up from his teeth, and his breath came in gasps.

He suddenly flung her away with an exclamation of horror, and stood shaking for a moment, as he realised what he had intended to do. Then he, too, turned on his heel and swung down the hill.

Having sucked a clover-head dry, the bee moved off, and its humming hung for a moment on the air. The boy raised his voice again in a long whoop, but at a greater distance than before. The linnet's song ceased, and the bird dipped away. Below, the old clock sang the death and the birth of an hour. . . .

"Evelyn . . . Evelyn . . ."

CHAPTER XVII

YOUNG Ashley opened the gate of the little churchyard gently and closed it behind him. His hands were still shaking and his heart still beating quickly.

He halted on the narrow gravel path, bordered with irregular lines of box, and took off his hat. He would not stand by his father's grave until he had mastered himself. There was not much to tell him, but he would say what he had to say coolly.

In the fading light he stood erect, with limp arms and set face, among the graves of the villagers, young and old. Young and old, many of them had worked on the farm. Young and old, many of them had been known to him by sight. Angry blood no longer rushed through their veins. Pain and happiness afflicted them no longer. They had escaped.

In the fading light beneath the philosophic but sympathetic arms of the ancient yew trees, the stones,

some flat, some erect, some at queer angles, some very old, some glaringly new, gleamed coldly. The silence was broken by the thoughtless and merry screams of the swallows, who made a playground of the churchyard. The motionlessness of the place was disturbed by a robin with dim breast, which jumped stiffly from grave to grave, now perching, with bobbing tail, on the trumpet of a stone angel, now on a wreath of withered blooms that lay upon a neglected mound of grass. The scent of flowers hung upon the air.

Then, at last, young Ashley made his way to the grave of his father.

He took a revolver out of his pocket and placed it by his side. It was the one which had enabled the elder Ashley to take a short cut to death.

He looked down upon the letters carved primly upon the stone and read them over mechanically—"John Everard Campbell Ashley. John Everard Campbell Ashley, born, died. For he loved, for he loved."

Swamping his great loneliness, forcing aside his grief, came a rush of intense bitterness. His face took on a sneer as he reviewed in his mind the small procession of days in which so much had

occurred. He saw himself waking up and going to bed with the sun, a sorrowful but not discontented man. He saw himself going through his day's work with quiet energy and determination, painfully conscious of his father's absence, but fully aware and appreciative of the ripening beauty of the earth. He saw himself flung into a state of chaos at the sudden apparition of the woman who had seemingly fallen from the sky. He lived over again the thrill, the bewilderment, the wonder, the desire. He heard himself appealing to his father to be let off his promise never to have anything to do with a woman of the world. With contempt he went through his blind infatuation, his implicit belief, his absolute and willing capitulation. He watched himself as he danced through the hours with his blood on fire. He lived over again the exquisite moments when he lay in utter and blissful subjection at the feet of the beautiful little creature whose voice was music, and whose eyes were magnets and whose breath was intoxicating. Stone by stone he rebuilt the shattered castle in which he and she were to have solved the mystery and discovered the secret of life, and with a shaking heart he passed through again that wonderful hour

in which he had climbed up to the window and held the warm, sweet body close against his heart. He revived the feeling of ecstasy which possessed him as he stumbled blindly home, certain that all was right with the world, and that it was only a matter of days before he should possess her, body and soul; the sense of calm assurance and thankfulness which were his as he waited for her on the hill; the frightful shock caused by her callous announcement of the arrival of her husband. His breathing became short, and the perspiration broke out on his forehead as he again felt his fingers tightening round the slim throat and the mad desire to prevent her, by death, from ever being held in another man's arms.

It has been shown that young Ashley was no different from ninety-nine men out of a hundred, and that he was his father's son. Like his father and the rest of us, he was stifled with the belief that he was the only man since the beginning of all things to suffer. Like his father and the rest of us, he regarded himself as the only man living except his father to be tricked as he had been tricked, and no persuasion, however eloquent and logical, could have got him out of the belief that

every woman was as bad and as cunning and as devilish and as utterly worthless as the woman who had chosen him with whom to pass the time.

"Father," he said, bending over the grave, "you were right, after all. I am sorry I asked you to let me off my promise. Her beauty took my breath away. I never had seen anything so wonderful before. . . . I needn't tell you what she did. You can guess . . . all the same, it has done for me. I shall end it with your pistol. Will you keep a look-out for me?"

He leaned low over the grave and kissed the stone. His hand closed over the revolver. As he cocked it a thrush in a tree almost within arm's length of him suddenly broke into a throbbing song.

Young Ashley started guiltily and listened. In the song he caught a note of optimism and a love of life that put him to shame. He looked round. The night had opened her eyes while he had knelt there. Over his head an evening star gazed down upon him steadily.

"Coward," croaked a frog at his side.

"Coward," whispered the wind.

"Live, live, and thank God for His great gift," sang the bird. "Put back that revolver. You are *not*

the only living thing to know suffering. You are *not* the only one to meet with falseness and trickery. Go home and live it down. Go home, young Ashley, and carry out your work. There are other women in the world, good, sweet women, whose lives are like the aroma of flowers, whose influence in the world is blown upon the wind. Don't whine and grizzle like a school-girl because the only woman you happen to have met is not one of these. Get up and play the man. Even if you don't have the good fortune to find one of these, the earth is very beautiful, and you are needed by the earth. Your father's case was a different one. He didn't take his life until he knew that the woman he had loved and had lost was free. He had lived without her for twenty-five bitter years, and he hurried, rightly or wrongly, to join her. You have no such excuse. The creature who twisted you round her finger and dropped you when you had served her purpose belongs to no sex. You are badly hit, but the wound will heal. You gave her your heart. Don't feed the maw of her vanity by throwing her your life. Go home, young Ashley. Who knows how much you may not be needed there? Who knows, who knows . . . who . . . knows?"

The song stopped as suddenly as it had begun. Another star came out and blinked cheerfully at him.

Young Ashley slipped the revolver into his pocket and rose to his feet. He was cramped and wet with dew, but his pulse was normal and his blood cool.

"Father," he said, "I am going back to the farm. Whether the bird said those things to me or not, they are true. There is work for me to do, and life is very short. I still refuse to believe that all women are alike. I will see. . . . Good-night, father."

Young Ashley shut the gate of the little churchyard after him softly and turned his face in the direction of home. Hope led him by the hand through the copse, not despair.

CHAPTER XVIII

THERE were two ways from the churchyard to Ashley's farm—the long way over the Hog's back and the short way through the village.

With a superstitious feeling for which he was unable to account, young Ashley chose the shorter way. "Who knows how much you may not be needed at home," he repeated to himself again and again. And the faster he walked, the louder rang this sentence in his ears.

Since the death of his father, young Ashley had not felt that he was needed in the world. He gave work to a handful of men, and so enabled them to bring up their families, it is true. Old Sloke and his faithful wife depended upon him for a livelihood, it is true. The poor woman and her little superfluous child would have to enter the workhouse but for his charity, it is true. But others would carry on the farm if he were to give it up, and pay the same wages to his men and to the Slokes, and he could leave in the parson's care enough money to

provide for the woman and the child for whom his father had been so sorry. And so the bare idea of his being needed at home again gave swiftness to his stride. So great a hold did the words of the bird's song take upon him that he broke into a run as he cleared the copse and turned into the road.

If, in passing, he had looked into the post office, he would have seen Mrs. Blundell, smiling cynically, leaning over the desk, writing out a telegram. He would not have seen the wording of the message. Had he done so it would have conveyed very little to his mind. It was addressed to Valentine Worthing, 333 Piccadilly, London: "Meet me Paddington to-morrow 2.45.—BETTY BLUNDELL."

But young Ashley's eyes were looking straight ahead. Betty Blundell and all to do with her must belong to the past. She had played the chief part in a bad dream. He would root her out of his memory, he determined.

All the same, his pace quickened as he ran under the windows of Mrs. Weeks's cottage, and his teeth came together with a snap.

He opened the white gate of the farm and pulled up. There were lights in the kitchen and the sitting-room. But the place was as quiet as usual.

The superstitious feeling was stronger upon him than ever. He examined the house anxiously. For some moments he stood irresolute, frightened to go in. Was he to be disappointed? Had he been cheated out of Death by a will-o'-the-wisp? It was all very well to tell him that the earth needed him. There were plenty to look after the earth. He had been necessary to his father. In those days, there was something to live for. If only he could find some human being who needed him now, apart from wages, how good a thing were life !

He found old Sloke waiting on the threshold. He searched the man's face eagerly. He saw anxiety suddenly replaced by relief. But nothing else.

He passed quickly into the sitting-room and looked round wistfully. The lamp stood alight upon the table. The windows were open, and the scented air filled the room. The cat rose up from the hearth and rubbed against his ankles. The sheep-dog charged at him, barking loudly. The lamp-light fell softly upon the photograph of old Ashley. But the room was empty.

With a feeling of poignant disappointment young Ashley sat down in his chair.

"Who knows how much you may not be needed at home?" What did that mean, if it meant anything? Young Ashley did not know whom he expected to find, but he had expected to find someone. There was no one. He was still alone. He was to remain alone, always.

As he said these things to himself, young Ashley rose quickly and stood listening. He strode to the door and opened it. He could hear the rumble of old Sloke's voice in the kitchen and the chink of crockery. Nothing that was not usual. Then he shut the door and turned into the room. With a sudden feeling of excitement he went over to his father's chair, which stood in the shadow.

With difficulty young Ashley restrained a cry.

With her golden head resting against the back of the chair, her long lashes lying on her pale cheeks, glistening with tears, her thin, black legs hanging limp, her hands crossed upon her lap, lay the little superfluous girl, fast asleep.

From under her hands half an envelope peeped, with a black border. Young Ashley bent over the little girl, and held his breath. His heart beat quickly. He saw his name upon the envelope. With the gentleness of a woman he drew the

envelope away and crept to the lamp. With a hand that trembled he opened the envelope and read the note.

"HONOURED SIR,—But for your father and you, my baby and me would have starved or gone to the workhouse. I have prayed to God to bless you both for your goodness every night of my life. I now write this knowing that I am going. It will be brought to you by my child when I am dead. She will need a friend. Dare I ask . . ."

Young Ashley dropped the letter upon the table and flung his arms above his head. "Oh, my God," he cried in his heart, "this is good of You. In a bird's song Your message came, and I give You thanks. I *am* needed in the world. Here is a little girl who shall be one of the good, sweet women of the earth. I will guard her. Nothing of harm shall come to her, ever."

With a smile upon his face, young Ashley tiptoed into the kitchen.

"Mrs. Sloke," he said, in a whisper, "the little girl. When did she come?"

"Well, theer now!" cried Sloke. "Dagged if Oi didn't forget to tell 'ee about . . ."

"Never mind. . . . Her mother's dead."

"Yes, sir," said Mrs. Sloke. "Yesterday, poor thing!"

"She has asked me in a letter to take care of the child. I shall do so," said young Ashley, holding his head high. "Get my father's room ready for her."

"The old master's, sir?" There was surprise as well as pleasure in the woman's voice.

"Yes; and lay her place by my side at the table." A gush of tears came suddenly into young Ashley's eyes. "Oh, Mrs. Sloke," he said, with the abandonment of a boy, "it is very good to be needed again."

He returned to the sitting-room and stood looking down at the little girl.

She gave a long sigh and opened her eyes. For a moment she forgot where she was. Bewildered and nervous, her hands wandered about for the letter. Then she slipped out of the chair and gave a curtsey.

"Oh, Master John," she said. "If you please, I came with a letter from—from . . ."

Her mouth trembled. She shut her eyes. Her little shoulders shook with sobs.

Young Ashley sat down, put his arm round the child, and drew her head down upon his chest, gently.

"Poor little girl," he whispered, "poor little girl, poor little girl! . . . It is like that with me too. You have lost your mother and I my father. We were both alone. But you will have me now, and I shall have you, and I will try and make up a little, if I can, for your loss. It will be a poor try, because no one can ever make up for it. But I will help you to keep your mother's grave green, and you shall help me with my father's. Will you, little girl?"

She put her hands against his shoulders and leaned back and looked into his face.

"Yes, Master John," she said. Then she flung her arms round his neck and pressed her fresh, sweet lips on his cheek.

Young Ashley stood up and went over to the window with the little girl's hand in his. A new moon hung shyly in the sky.

"Who knows," he thought, "who knows?"

THE END

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